

**ADULT EDUCATION, POPULAR CULTURE, AND WOMEN'S
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING WITH
*THE AVENGERS***

A Dissertation

by

ROBIN REDMON WRIGHT

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2007

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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August 2007

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ABSTRACT

Adult Education, Popular Culture, and Women's Identity Development: Self-Directed

Learning with *The Avengers*. (August 2007)

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of popular culture, especially prime-time television, on women learner-viewers' identity development. More specifically, this study explores one specific television show, the 1962-64 Cathy Gale episodes of *The Avengers* as a portal to adult learning. It further explores the ways in which television, as a form of public pedagogy, can help facilitate the formation of a critical or feminist identity among adult learner viewers. The research questions guiding this study were: 1) How and what did women learn from watching *The Avengers*? 2) How did women incorporate that learning into their lives and into their identities? and 3) How did women interpret and accommodate the feminist example of Cathy Gale?

Data for this study was collected over a two-and-a-half year period. Data consisted of interviews with contemporaneous viewers of the Cathy Gale *Avengers* episodes, interviews with scriptwriters and the actor who played Cathy Gale, Honor Blackman, numerous documents from statistics obtained at the British Film Institute, fanzines, and newspaper articles of the period.

Analysis revealed that in particular historical times and situations television viewing can become a form of public pedagogy, facilitating transformational learning in adult viewers that produces lasting, life-changing effects. The investigation revealed that not only did biologically-born women incorporate Cathy Gale's feminist example into their identities and actions, but biologically born males whose core gender identity was female did also.

This dissertation is written in article format. Each of the six sections has been designed as stand-alone pieces to aid accessibility and enhance readers' engagement with the study.

DEDICATION

For my mother, Wilda Fabiola Smith Redmon, who left this world for another while I was in England conducting this research. Among her last words to me when I telephoned before leaving for London were, “So you’re going to talk to old women like me?”

I miss you, Mom.

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I would like to thank my husband, Gary, for encouraging me to investigate this topic, for convincing me that I deserved the opportunity to pursue a doctorate, and for supporting me in my efforts to grow and test the limits of my potential. He is, truly, the best teacher anyone could ever have. I also want to thank my grandson, Kaidyn, for bringing me so much joy and teaching me how to play again. Before he came into our lives, I had forgotten what it was like to laugh till I couldn't catch my breath. Anticipating time with him has made even the most grueling schedule bearable.

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I owe much to Alvin C. Cage, former Director of Steen Library at Stephen F. Austin State University, and my former employer. I would not have been able to pursue this doctorate if he had not understood and encouraged my desire to do so. His willingness to allow flexibility in my work schedule and his consistent encouragement of my efforts made it possible for me to get this far.

And I, of course, want to thank Honor Blackman, for her courage and tenacity in creating Cathy Gale and breaking the mold of the traditional, subservient, weak television woman. Her determination and her incredible talent and ability changed the lives of many of her women viewers. And I thank her for taking time out of her incredibly busy schedule of stage performances, television appearances, and charity efforts to talk with me. Thanks also to her agent, Natasha Stevenson, for graciously allowing me to see her without an appointment and for being sympathetic to my pleas.

I want to thank the women who contacted me to participate in this study, and all fans of *The Avengers* who wrote to me expressing support. Thank you to David Smith, www.theavengers.tv/forever creator and webmaster, to Tom Soter, scholar and cult TV fan, who offered help, advice and videos of hard to find episodes, to Dr. Toby Miller, for always promptly returning emails and pointing me in the right direction, and to Brian Clemens and Jon Manchip White who offered unique insights into the world of 1960s British television.

Finally, I want to thank my parents for loving me even though they never quite understood why I do what I do.

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INTRODUCTION

The Quest[ion]

*What follows is a story. It is the narrative of how this research sought me out, stalked me, seduced me, detained and imprisoned me—the interminable sentence having stretched over three years—so far. My story will alternate between a discussion of documented events and theoretical musings leading up to my capture, and the narrative [in italics] of how this project discovered, stalked, courted, trapped, and finally held me to be tutored, dominated, caressed, instructed and, in due course, transformed. This **introduction** is a romance [between researcher & knowledge, between explorer & discovery], and it is a detective story, complete with suspense, drama, and surprising twists. In the spirit Valerie Lee Chapman (2005b, pp. 260-261) I sincerely hope that this story “is accessible so that people don’t fall asleep reading it.” Let’s rock ‘n’ roll!*

A Man Became a Woman or The Appearance of an Androgynous Puss ‘n Boots

In June of 1962, a woman in London walked onto the set of Independent Television’s (ITV) *The Avengers* to replace one of the two male leads. By 1964, both the character she portrayed—and the actor herself—had gained so much influence over the public that the show was temporarily “banned in England for electoral interference” (T. Miller, 1997, pp. 2-5). The government feared that her appearance “in a commercial for

This dissertation follows the style of *Adult Education Quarterly*.

the Liberal Party,” for which she had actively campaigned, would unduly influence the election results (T. Miller, 1997, p. 5). Mrs. Catherine Gale, played by Honor Blackman, has been hailed as “the first feminist to come to a television serial; the first woman to fight back” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 7), “the first really emancipated feminist” (Madden, 2000), “Britain’s new symbol of womanhood” (D. Rogers, 1989, p. 15; Teranko, 1969, p. 88), and “the first feminist female lead” (Andrae, 1996, p. 115). She “rocked the existing stereotype of subservient, domesticated TV women” (Richardson, 1996, p. 41). *As for me, in 1962, at almost three years old, I was an ocean—and a culture—away.*

In the television program, the character of Mrs. Catherine Gale, a widow in her mid-thirties, regularly challenges the thinking of the status quo—which bowler-hatted John Steed, played by actor Patrick Macnee, represents. He is government—she is not, as she often reminds him. He is old school tie; she is black leather combat suit. He comes to her for help because she is brilliant, experienced, and able to handle herself in dangerous situations. She helps Steed only to fight injustice, not because of any particular sense of patriotism. And she regularly challenges his cavalier attitude towards human rights, biological warfare, nuclear arms, and individual liberty.

According to Brookfield (1986) television rarely presents “material directly critical of the structures dominant in society or strongly disapproving of governmental actions” (p. 155). Yet the character of Dr. Catherine Gale often did just that. Her character is an example of the “opposition and resistance” that can occur when “producers, writers, and performers struggle to create programs which are neither purely palliative nor wholly uncritical of prevailing structures and ideologies” (Brookfield,

1986, p. 155). Despite the fact that, in 1962, second-wave feminism had not yet begun in England, Cathy Gale was created with a black belt in judo, a doctorate in anthropology, an expertise with firearms, a history of humanitarianism, a past as both a freedom-fighter and a big-game hunter, and a philosophy of humanism. She is also a superb photographer with a darkroom in her apartment. She often guest lectures at erudite societies on a variety of topics, from her photographic trip down the Amazon to her anthropological research on remote African tribes. The producers wanted her to appear as a cross between Margaret Mead and Margaret Bourke-White, the famous photographer for *Life Magazine* who went on photo shoots to some of the most remote, and often embattled, places in the world (T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). Her name, Catherine Gale, was developed from the concept that she was expected to hit the television audience like a ***gale force*** wind. (Macnee & Cameron, 1989; T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1987, 1989). Unlike her co-star in the series, Steed, who is a man of independent means, she works to support herself. Also, unlike Steed, Cathy Gale cares about people, all people, even the criminals she helps to catch.

In a 1962 mandate to the writers of the show, producer Leonard White cautioned them to always connect Cathy's involvement with Steed to her work as an anthropologist and/or photographer and insisted that they understand the character of Cathy Gale:

Cathy must be correctly motivated She must have something special to contribute on the mission. So special that Steed needs her help. She must, above all, have the humanitarian and the moral attitude to the story. She wants to help those who are in peril or distress. She cares about them. This must of itself give

rise to some conflict with STEED. His strictly professional and ruthless attitude will often enrage her [*underlining and capitals in the original*]. (D. Rogers, 1987, p. 15)

Honor Blackman left *The Avengers* in 1964 in order to play the memorable **PUSSY GALORE** in the James Bond film, *Goldfinger*. The **Gale Force** was gone from the small screen. Her fun-seeking replacement had relatively few of the characteristics delineated for Cathy, whose interest in helping Steed was based solely on her personal ethics, activism, and convictions. In the pre-embryonic stages of the feminist movement's second wave, Dr. Catherine Gale represented, not what was, but what could be. Her successor wore mini-skirts, drove fancy cars, and helped Steed because she enjoyed the adventure. I had been a casual fan of those more fantastical, post-Cathy Gale, Americanized *Avengers* for decades. But when I watched that first Cathy Gale episode in 2002, 40 years after she erupted into British living rooms on Saturday nights, I began to ponder . . .

The purpose of this study was to examine public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000), as experienced between television audiences and media products and, more specifically, to explore one specific television program, *The Avengers*, as a site of adult learning and feminist/female identity development. I was particularly interested in exploring the ways in which television can help facilitate the formation of a critical or feminist identity among adult learner-viewers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How and what did women learn from watching *The Avengers*?

2. How did women incorporate that learning into their lives and into their identities?, and
3. How did women interpret and accommodate the feminist example of Cathy Gale?

What I found by conducting this investigation will, I hope, give educators pause and encourage adult education professionals: 1) to rethink popular culture as a site of adult learning and, 2) to recognize the urgent need for more investigations into the impact of popular culture on adult learners. I also found that traveling this research journey revealed much to me about myself.

Why Her, Why Me, Why Now? or A Tale of a Baited Bird

In September of 2002, at 9:15 p.m. on a Tuesday evening, I walked into the Barnes & Noble Booksellers in College Station, Texas in a state of apprehension. I was tired, but I still had a nearly three-hour drive home, and I had to be at work at 6:30 a.m. the following morning. I had just completed the first week of the 9-hour coursework requirement for a doctoral student in adult education. The award of a Regents Fellowship, which I needed in order to return to school after years in the workplace, required that I take the full 9-hour load each semester. I crammed all three courses into Monday night and Tuesday, so I could schedule my usual 40 hours at my office around those doctoral requirements. I accomplished this by working 6:00 a.m. till 2:00 p.m. on Monday, driving nearly three hours from Nacogdoches, Texas to College Station, taking a three-hour class from 5:00 to 8:00, spending a night at a hotel, then taking two more

three-hour classes on Tuesday. Now it was time to head back to Nacogdoches so that, beginning Wednesday morning, I could put in the remaining 32 hours over the three long days left in the workweek. I was running late because I had to go to Copy Corner after class turned out at 8:15 (it ran over—it always did) to pick up a course instructional packet required for the class. I stopped in Barnes & Noble to get coffee, and to stretch, before beginning the nearly 3-hour drive back to Nacogdoches. I had no idea I was being watched. . .

I strolled through the bookstore thinking, “Fellowship or no fellowship, I just cannot do school full-time and work full-time.” My daughter was about to have a baby. She would be a single mom, just barely 20 years old herself. My job was very demanding; my administrative and supervisory duties were stressful. This was really insane.

*But I wanted a Ph.D. in adult education. I wanted to LEARN and I wanted to return to teaching adults. I smiled to myself. I was 43 years old. I had earned the right to pursue my dreams. Grandmother or not, right? **STRETCH, YAWN, GULP COFFEE, LOOK THROUGH THE BARGAIN BOOKS. THINK THIS OVER . . .***

*Suddenly—there it was. My eyes fell on a three VHS video set of an old **The Avengers** television program for a mere \$9.95. I had a set of those tapes at home—with Emma Peel as John Steed’s partner—a Christmas gift from Gary, my husband. \$9.95—Now that was a bargain! They cost twice that from A&E! With eyebrows raised in surprise, I picked up the set. “**Who is this blond woman?**” I had never seen her before, and I am a long-time Avengers fan. I was intrigued, mentally energized. This was*

*something to look forward to. A badly needed escape. Episodes from 1963. **The Avengers** with a different female lead from Emma Peel, the femme fatale I knew and loved. Emma Peel had always been a TV character I admired. She was pretty, funny, and strong. She was educated, rich, and wonderfully ENGLISH. She had a black belt in karate, and looked like a ballet dancer when she fought the bad guys. I have been a self-confessed anglophile since I was old enough to read. I fell in love with Sherlock Holmes at age 9 and I have two degrees in English literature because I never lost that passion for Sherlock and all things British—from the Rolling Stones to the Royal Family. British culture was far removed from the Appalachia of my upbringing. But the Stones, PBS Mystery Theatre, and decades of voraciously consuming other British fiction, music and TV had helped form me and would temporarily slake my unquenchable thirst for all things British.*

*I took the three Cathy Gale **Avengers** tapes home on the trip back to Nacogdoches, and the long drive home gave me time to savor a delicious anticipation of the possibilities those mysterious videos held. I had no idea that I had just nibbled the bait . . .*

Adult Education, Popular Culture, and Class

Back in Morgan County, Tennessee, where I come from, nobody is really expected to go to college. But if they do, they don't talk about it. School was not a priority for folks. TV, on the other hand, was essential. These days almost every trailer park, housing project, farm, and "old home place" has a satellite dish. Many of the

county residents only recently received cable. They had been just too far out “in the sticks.” When I was growing up in the 1960s and 70s, we had only two snowy channels, NBC and CBS, picked up by turning the 30-foot aluminum antenna just so. This was a two person operation, with someone screaming through the window, “A little more—no!—too much—back—back more—other way!” The system meant many fights with siblings over who would go outside in the freezing mountain winter weather to “turn the pole.” Since I had two older brothers, I usually lost the argument. They outnumbered me. Eventually, I learned to stay in my room, listen to music, and read Conan Doyle, Tolkien, Agatha Christie . . .

Fiske (1989) argues that:

Television, books, newspapers, records, and films are popular partly because their nature as media enable them to be used in ways in which the people wish to use them. As they cannot impose their meanings on people, neither can they impose the way they are received into everyday life. Popular discrimination extends beyond the choice of the texts and points of pertinence within them, to cover the choice of medium that delivers the text and the mode of consumption that best fits the ‘consumer’s’ socio-cultural position and requirements. (p. 115)

Beginning when I was young, I chose reading fiction and listening to rock music as my primary modes of pop culture consumption. Both fiction and music, as well as what television I did watch, influenced my identity development. People make such choices based on availability and other factors in their lives, but everyone consumes popular

culture. Even those who try to avoid it, are exposed to it by simply walking down the street. Popular culture is everywhere.

Gramsci (Mayo, 1999) believed in the possibility of the transformative power of popular culture and felt it could—and should—be used for social change. He saw the hegemonic structures of popular culture as an essential focus for action on a large scale.

As Mayo (1999) points out:

Gramsci's focus on both aspects of the 'high' and 'low' cultural divide occurs as part of a constant search for a synthesis of potentially emancipatory elements found in both spheres. . . . Gramsci laments the deterioration of serial fiction in Italy and argues that the proletariat should develop this form of popular cultural production This literature must have been considered by Gramsci capable of providing working-class members with a set of meanings relevant to the revolutionary project he had in mind. (p. 50)

Just as Gramsci recognized the power of popular fiction in his quest for the social transformation of Western Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, critical adult educators today should recognize that the power of television, popular fiction, the Internet, and video games may be among the best ways to reach the poor, the working-class, women and other marginalized groups.

I believe, like hooks (2000) that “parasitic class relations and the greed for wealth and power have led women [and academics] to betray the interests of [the] poor and working-class” (p. 114). I also concur with Bourdieu (2000) that “tastes are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference” (p. 205). The academy is a space that is

foreign to many working-class individuals—but everybody watches television. Moreover, it has been my experience that many academics are intolerant of working-class language and leisure pursuits. But popular culture consumption crosses class lines. Most people engage with some form of popular culture in their daily lives. Miller (N. Miller, 1999) notes the disdain some adult educators have for her passion for *Seinfeld*. She asks the million-dollar question: “Why are academics so ready to dismiss the artifacts of popular culture as trivial, intellectually superficial and aesthetically worthless?” (p. 2). I have observed a similar disdain for popular culture in many of my colleagues in graduate school—both in my master’s program in English literature and in the doctoral program in adult education. And in my 13 years working in higher education, I have observed that academics from many disciplines tend to dismiss popular culture as trivial, and fundamentally irrelevant to their more cerebral interests. They often consider engaging with pop culture to be a lower or working-class activity, despite the fact that it is their *choice* of popular culture products that differentiates them from working-class consumers. They are sometimes intolerant of students or, even, colleagues who express knowledge and excitement about some aspect of popular culture, such as television dramas, rock or hip-hop music, or popular film. Furthermore,

aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes; class endogamy is evidence of this. The most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated. This means that the games of artists and

aesthetes and their struggles for the monopoly of artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they seem. (Bourdieu, 2000, pp. 205-206)

This aversion to difference and the privileging of some tastes over others is as much an issue of class and socio-economic status as it is the quality of the art. The world is full of snobs. And there is nothing innocent about the **classism** that exists in educational research. And for academicians from the working class, to openly discuss our silencing and oppression would mean we have failed to “erase [our] incorrectness,” to “slough off our working-class skins” (Peckam, 1995, p. 274). So classism persists. (And I’ve TRIED to like opera—I really have—but *I can’t get no satisfaction* from it.)

I believe such elitism has caused many in adult education to neglect the area of cultural studies for academic research. The literature review in the following section makes clear that, while adult educators have always revered popular educators like Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, they have often neglected the very basis of their philosophy—to teach adults using what already interests them—to advocate for social change by dealing with the popular, “low” culture that influences the masses (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990; Freire, 1990; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Jacobs, 2003). Jacobs (2003) records Horton on his belief that education for social change should involve entertainment and the popular culture of working-class people:

We tried to involve everybody in singing and doing drama and laughing and telling stories because it’s part of their life. It’s more of a holistic approach to education, not just a bunch of unrelated segments. The way people live was more important than any class or subject we were dealing with. (p. XII)

Jacobs goes on to point out that Horton's success with educating adults for change is due to his **refusal** "to separate education from life and life from education, seeing education instead as a lifelong process that involves experience and the whole person" (p. XII). Popular culture and its influences are part of everyone's experiences. If education is a lifelong process involving the whole person, popular culture must be included in both our research and our pedagogy. Instead, adult educators continue to be

kind of elitist—teaching people things instead of helping them learn—
transmission of congealed knowledge, most of which belongs in museums for
people to go and look at like they look at a dinosaur. . . . We learned it from
somebody; we spent a lot of time learning it and we have to get our money's
worth out of that, so we have to teach it to someone else. So we pass along all
this congealed knowledge with all the juice squeezed out of it a long time ago
and call it education. (Horton, 2003, p. 224)

Ha! If most of what is taught in adult education classrooms is so stale and congealed it belongs in *museums*, as Horton believed, doesn't that make adult educators the narrow-minded elitists who regard themselves as "possessors of legitimate culture" and, therefore, the violent purveyors of the "aesthetic intolerance" that Bourdieu (2000, p. 205) warns against? If we're only interested in reproducing dinosaurs, we'll end up at Jurassic Park. Horton was a master popular educator who was instrumental in changing American culture. He was a critical educator who did not believe students had to be able to read and comprehend the elitist language used by the Frankfurt School, and its successors, to be educated. He understood the post-modern condition, and managed to

bring about positive change through education in spite of it. He accomplished that by working to know the whole person, sharing in his students' stories, laughter and "common" culture.

The QUESTion Taunts Its Prey or The Pussy Bats the Bird

I LOVED being back in graduate school. The drive was murder but, when I finally arrived for class, it was like reading J. R. R. Tolkien for the first time! Absolute immersion in another world. Adult education, I soon realized, was my home. I want my research, as well as my teaching, to add to a body of knowledge about how it might be possible for humanity to move in the direction of egalitarianism, peace, and a sustainable environment, and to inspire those desires in others. I am interested in social activism and critical research. I found those interests were encouraged, fertilized, and cultivated by studies in the discipline of adult education.

Of course, with re-entry into graduate school, the old insecurities came back. In my study of literature I loved critical theory with a passion, but I rarely spoke up in class. I always figured my interpretation of the opaque, translated, French, German and Russian texts had to be wrong. After all, I had learned very little in K-12 besides how to read. Virtually nothing else stuck. At 28, when I began college as a soon-to-be-divorced mom, I had to take remedial classes. I loved college, but other students, a decade my junior, knew so much more than I. Even though I was an English major, I spoke up in class as little as possible because, although I knew the definitions of the vocabulary of academic discourse, and I understood most of the critical theory jargon I studied, I was

often **guessing at the pronunciation**. Not a good thing to do. After a couple of embarrassments, I shut up. Graduate school in English literature was worse. My classmates and I formed critical theory study groups and would get together informally to discuss the thoughts of Derrida, Burke, Foucault, Lacan, Saussure, Bakhtin, Kristeva, and so forth. At times the other students would talk about how they had such discussions all their lives with their parents around the dinner table, and the father who was an English professor had this opinion, and the mother who was a psychologist had that opinion, and another father who was a history professor at Rutgers had yet another. Neither of my parents graduated from high school, but when I was about five years old, my dad DID earn his GED. There had been no lively discussions of postmodern theory at my house, and Bakhtin was something you put on a cut you got climbing over a barbed-wire fence.

God! I was out of place. A fraud. I didn't belong. Besides that, the Tennessee program is quite selective and my fellow grad students came from Brown or Yale or NYU or one of those elite New England colleges named after dead, white colonizers. I was a home grown, Roane State Community College graduate, University of Tennessee transfer student, Pell Grant-funded, 30-something mother of four, by now in my second marriage. **I couldn't really be getting this stuff!** So I said little but listened a lot. **HER-MI-NOO-TIC, HE-GI-MU-NY, -- Whew! Give me a good ON-A-MO-TA-PEE-A any day!** But what was much worse than pronouncing something incorrectly because I'd not **heard** it spoken, were the **SIMPLE** words that I had heard all my life—pronounced **WRONG**. Appalachian dialect is unique and there were so many words I had

*pronounced “incorrectly” for 30 years. Since this is a doctoral dissertation introduction, most people reading this will have no clue what that’s like—remember, I had a B.A. in ENGLISH by then. But anyone who has moved from one **class** to another will understand. It’s the words you **think** you **do** know that **getcha**.*

*I persevered. Tolkien helped, I think, as did Rock ‘n’ Roll. From age 12 to about 25, I used to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings trilogy every year. Loved living in Middle Earth. I suppose you’d have to be dense not to draw parallels with history, capitalism, government corruption, religious oppression, the Christ allegory, yadda, yadda, yadda. I didn’t know Foucault, but I could recognize a visual depiction of an apparatus (1977) when I saw it described in Middle Earth and the six-o’clock news—the destructive forces of hegemonic dominance and the interplay of discourse, power and resistance. Of course, my friends thought I was nuts when I’d point to the naked mountain tops all around, raped, pillaged, and left bare by strip-mining, and say, “It’s just like Treebeard’s forest. It’s evil.” But I learned **the value and self-fulfillment that comes from reading and re-reading and reading again the texts that stimulate and expand the imagination. I learned the most important lesson of my life, because I was tired of turning that damn, cold, aluminum pole for my big brothers: Education happens in unexpected places. Huh! Public-private-personal pedagogy. And equally influential was rock music—much of it protesting against the Viet Nam war, capitalistic greed, environmental damage, and authoritarian control. Rock music inspired me to***

dream of protesting against the rigid, protestant, guilt-producing confines of my life—even if only within the walls of my room and in my imagination.

*So with that life-long, it seems, habit of mind, I watched Cathy Gale in 2002 with an almost perverse fascination for what she represented to me. Unfortunately, the first tape I placed in the VCR opened with “The White Elephant.” Because the production quality of this episode is one of the worst of the series—there was a fly crawling across the camera-lens throughout much of the taping—Gary, refused to watch it with me after about five minutes. He, too, was an Emma Peel fan, however, and I was eventually able to tease his curiosity enough to pull him back in. Then, of course, Gary fell in love Cathy Gale straight away. Not surprising. She, after all, is Pussy Galore in black leather. Knowing I’m a champagne addict, he would sometimes buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate our making a little time to watch Cathy Gale together, telephones turned off and books put aside. That’s when the stalking started. I couldn’t stop the QUESTioning. My **bird** brain, the **traitor**, kept applying the theories and narratives I had studied to the QUESTion of what happened in that historical moment when Cathy Gale showed women the future. The QUESTion was dogging me. It showed up in every course at Texas A&M, wriggled its way into every reading assignment, and started slipping into bed with me at night. I would pause the tape or DVD to pace the bedroom floor and talk about it. I wondered what **MY** life would have been like if I had watched her as a teen or young adult. I became convinced that I would have been—different.*

Gary thought I just couldn’t shut up about it because of the champagne, until he, too, began to fall into the trap. We spent hours [and ink cartridges] printing out episode

guides and character histories, not to mention a lot of money on champagne, and we engaged in numerous conversations that deconstructed Cathy Gale . . .

Adult Learning and Pop Culture

This dissertation is an argument for more research on popular culture, and on consumers' interactions with popular media, as portals for adult learning and *even* for using popular culture to facilitate the of the kind of social change experienced, and advocated for, by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. Miller (1997) argued that the 1960s Cathy Gale *Avengers* episodes are quite relevant to the ambiguity and frustrations experienced during times of social unrest today. He offers an example:

In search of distraction during the [first] Gulf War, *New York Post* TV critic David Bianculli turned to the early Blackman-Macnee episodes on A&E. But a particular dialogue about the futility of the arms race, early-1960s style, was so prescient that he could not relax. The issues were still real ones. (p. 125)

I believe this to be a snippet of the dialogue he is referring to:

Mrs. Gale: *You know, it's an ironic theory of yours, that arming for World War III is the sole security against it.*

Steed: *So long as the arms race goes neck and neck.*

Mrs. Gale: *I don't think anyone would dare start another war and risk the reprisal.*

Steed: *Someone will certainly try. History's full of people who've tried to get away with it.*

Mrs. Gale: *We can't go on arming forever!*

Steed: *[cheerfully offering a biscuit tin] Biscuit?*

Mrs. Gale: *No, thanks!*

—'The Nutshell', 1963.

This conversation is, indeed, also **relevant to Gulf War II** and the US's contemporary relationship with countries like North Korea and Iran. Cathy Gale argued with Steed about numerous ecological, political, ideological, and ethical issues. She regularly encountered and defied sexist attitudes from various male characters in the stories. She represented, in words, actions and appearance, a counter-hegemonic force to traditional British culture. Most importantly for the women in this study, Cathy Gale's **androgynously constructed persona**, as much as the stories in the scripts, raised questions of gender identity, gender roles, and women's rights that we are continuing to debate today. In essence, Cathy's text was one of a public pedagogy that has remained relevant.

According to Giroux (2005, p. 2), "the Bush administration has evoked the cult of traditionalism, religious fundamentalism, and absolute reign of the market" associated with the mid-twentieth century—the era when Cathy represented a resistance to just such ideals. Perhaps this is the explanation for her impact on her audience. For Giroux, "pedagogy must address the relationships between politics and agency, knowledge and power, subject positions and values, and learning and social change while always being open to debate, resistance and a culture of questioning" (Giroux, 2005, p. 11). Moreover, he adds, "educators would do well to take account of the profound transformations taking place in the public sphere and reclaim pedagogy as a central element of cultural politics" (p. 12). It is the public sphere of television drama that is the focus of this study of adult identity development and Cathy Gale's audience. It is an investigation of political, personal, and public learning.

Armstrong (2005) effectively argues that, “a cultural studies perspective on the perception of democracy and the nature of political apathy” is needed if we are to be critical educators working for change. He proposes that “using a semiotic deconstruction of cultural media messages we might gain an understanding of how we come to form and accept particular cultural and political values in everyday life” (p. 11). This is certainly a reassertion of Horton’s message to adult educators: Look at what is important in students’ everyday lives, discover what they are choosing to do with their time, and find out how those cultural products may be shaping their political, social, gender, and workplace identities. This study is a retrospective, reflexive investigation of one such cultural media message.

The Simmering of Critical-Popular Stew or A Bird in the Snare of the Fowler

*As my pursuit of a doctorate progressed, Gary and I experienced family problems that consumed much of our energies. Dysfunctional adult children with addictive personalities, my daughter’s meltdown and abandonment of her son, the increasing duties as “NinNin and Papaw” [we essentially became parents, again, of a two-year-old], and our own aging and infirm parents, created financial problems, relationship problems, and physical problems. But the **question** of Cathy Gale kept creeping into my life in unexpected ways. Granted—watching those old TV episodes always started out as an escape from the stress. But I was reading feminist critical theories, educational theories of all kinds, adult educational theories and histories, etc., and, of course, the latest on learning. Issues of learning, tutoring and pedagogy*

dominated my job as a college learning center director. When it all became too much, I would take a break and watch The Avengers. Since my mind was stewing in critical theories and educational discourse, I couldn't separate my interest in the Cathy Gale episodes from that academic potage. Cathy fell into the soup.

My background in English literature had prepared me with two other ingredients to spice it up. First, I'd studied English literature from Beowulf to contemporary literature and had learned to put texts in historical, critical feminist context. [In fact, the first question asked of me when I did my orals for my master's degree was, "Give us a critical feminist reading of the women in Beowulf." [Gulp, stall, think!]

I passed with flying colors. I enjoyed wielding a critical hammer. Second, I had completed and thoroughly enjoyed a two-course package entitled something like, "Film as Literature," during my master's program. The two courses were designed to teach students how to analyze film as texts. We critically deconstructed everything as texts—script, story, plot, camera angles, lighting, direction, sound, and set in films such as *Psycho* and *Casablanca*. Doing so, when watching film or television, has become a habit.

*By 2003 the stalking had escalated exponentially. Cathy Gale was a **force** to be reckoned with. Four decades before, Cathy Gale had broken through a space-time continuum from some future, less sexist society and stopped off in the early 1960s to shake things up! I purchased books on almost every aspect of the show, and started looking for context—what people thought about the character. The Avengers became my*

*only hobby—the only thing I did other than work, school, homework, and taking care of my precious grandson. It was an escape from school and work. It was fascinating and fun. Gary, too, became hooked on the intellectual incongruity Cathy Gale represented with what he knows of history, women’s issues, and television. We shared both a fascination and a delight with this accidental “find” of those first videos. I bought more tapes, then DVDs, and, caught in the snare of curiosity, the courtship **with the question** began . . .*

TV Discourse Versus Academic Discourse

Miller (N. Miller, 1999) dared to ask publicly what I have asked myself privately for nearly two decades: “Why are the texts of postmodern theory so deeply dull?” (p. 2). I will never forget wading through the works of French theorist, Paul Ricoeur, during my master’s program. Brilliant guy—I think. In reality, pondering postmodern theory is exciting and mind-expanding—but the texts seem **purposefully** opaque and cumbersome. And this is supposed to be a **critical** bunch? What is egalitarian about that? And why the heck can’t they actually write for the oppressed they say they are deconstructing hegemonic forces to elevate from the constraints imposed by those oppressive forces?

Television, on the other hand, is a source of information and fiction/stories/discourse enjoyed and understood by people at all socio-economic levels. Women, who are, in general, in the home more than men, typically watch a lot of television. English (2006, p. 88) posits that most women’s learning research is framed in

the theory of humanistic relational learning, which claims that women “grow and develop best in connection and that this will foster empathy, vulnerability and participation.” It is time for new theories. Self-directed learning based on the possibilities provided by avant-garde female television characters, I found, can foster empowered identity development. There was nothing vulnerable about the women in this study. While they were schooled to be empathic and vulnerable, as most women were in the 1940s and 1950s, watching Cathy Gale empowered them with the knowledge that they can be empathetic, and still construct themselves as empowered, invulnerable women.

A Disorienting Dilemma or Rockin’ Robin is Caged

On the last day of classes at A&M in the fall of 2004, sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m., my life changed dramatically. A minor incident, a brief conversation, a moment long forgotten by all the other participants, threw me for an emotionally charged self-reflexive loop and changed the direction of my career/future/life. It happened like this . . .

*I arrived at A&M early because I wanted to discuss possibilities for dissertation topics with Jenny Sandlin, my committee chair, before I drove to Carolyn Clark’s home for the last meeting of a **life story** research class. Dr. Clark had graciously scheduled the last meeting at her home so we could celebrate the end of an investigation into the potential discoveries and rewards of researching people’s learning lives, share our own learning experiences and resultant class papers, and enjoy food and friendship. I was*

looking forward to it. In a festive mood, I walked the halls of offices looking for Jenny. I found her in Dr. Jamie Callahan's office, along with another lovely, young woman, a recent graduate of the adult education doctoral program. Jenny motioned me to a chair and introduced me to the other two women.

They were discussing the value of qualitative inquiry for educational research. Leslie, the recent graduate, said that her parents—both professors at A&M in the hard sciences—could not understand how interviewing women about their experiences could be valid research. As the conversation became more and more lively, I was transported back to my days discussing fellow students' parents' opinions on Foucault or Lacan during my master's program. I felt awkward and out of place. Then Jenny asked Leslie to tell me about her dissertation. She had investigated the self-directed learning experienced by women backpacking across Europe. She said, "I love to backpack and always learn a lot, so I thought I'd combine what I love to do with my dissertation," or something close to that. She had no idea the effect that simple statement would have on me. She explained the project briefly as the world disappeared around me.

*I had been struggling with ideas for a dissertation topic in adult education. A pilot study I conducted had been fascinating, but also disturbing. My desire to work for social justice and human rights made me want to do something that **mattered**. It made me focus on researching the poor and marginalized. And, I suddenly realized, my working-class work ethic separated "work" from "pleasure." It wasn't that I didn't enjoy my work or achieve satisfaction from helping others. I love that part of education. It is why I ended up as director of a learning center. It was a way for me to work toward*

*equal access to education for all students, irrespective of their cultural, socio-economic, or academic backgrounds. But it would not have been **possible** for me to **imagine** doing a dissertation stemming from something I enjoy doing outside of “work.” I realized, in that moment, that the issue of **class** was continuing to play out in my own career choices. You see, when you’ve managed to overcome the external evidence of being poor or working-class by moving into the middle class, you’re still bound and constrained by the embodied doctrine of the class into which you are born. The concept of “work” as separate from “leisure” or “pleasure” has been bred into my DNA.*

*And I was wearing down. The grueling schedule I’d been keeping for two-and-a-half years was beginning to rip the fiber of my spirit, allowing my desire to achieve academically to slowly seep out and dissipate into the atmosphere of my existence. I struggled with deciding on a dissertation topic, because I knew—I **knew**—I would interview people about their struggles with trying to acquire an education. I would relate to them, want to help them, and be emotionally drained by the experience. All the topics I had been tossing around involved older, disadvantaged learners and their struggles with negotiating the system in order to achieve an education. That was what I wanted to do—to help people. But I tend to worry about people and try to help them if they have problems. I **ended up** in learning assistance because of that impulse. I love helping people learn. But at that moment, I’d been going through a lot of stressful experiences in my personal life as well as in my job, and I didn’t know if I could undertake a study involving other peoples’ pain. But because I’m working-class, I **could***

not imagine research that didn't involve an immediate, practical application. I assumed I had to find a PROBLEM and solve it.

*Listening to Leslie tell the story of her fascinating research on women backpackers, and realizing that her research **mattered**, unsettled me to the point of tears. I mumbled “nice to have met you’s” and “got to go to class” and stumbled out of the office. I managed to find my car and, following directions jotted down on a yellow slip of paper, headed toward Carolyn’s home. I was so angry. I was trembling in my marrow with anger—at myself. No matter how many times it happens, I cannot seem to overcome the tendency to construct barriers to my potential and build walls against possibilities. It seems that I cannot break free of the limitations my class has bred into me. It confines me within catch words like “practical” and “useful” and “worthwhile.” Those words are blinders enabling me to be bridled and led down the working-class path laid down by my Protestant, fundamentalist, rural past and lined by tidbits from Poor Richard’s Almanac. As Burr (1995) concludes, “The very nature of ourselves as people, our thoughts, feelings and experiences, are all the result of language” (p. 33). Language IS class and class is embodied, embedded in the marrow, capillaries, and cell structure of my subjective self.*

Embodied Ethics and Corporealized Class

Any discussion of class issues is also a discussion of ethics. Is it ethical to classify human beings in a hierarchy of assigned values? And to say that class is not equal to value in human cultures is to ignore lived experience. It would mean there are

no ethical questions surrounding the significance of, for example, the socio-economic status of the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the economic backgrounds of the majority of the combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and, in contrast, the incomprehensible (to me) popularity of Paris Hilton. Class issues are ethical, as well as moral, issues. Fillion (2005) explains Foucault's view that ethics is "based on an individual's creating a work of art out of his or her life. . ." (p. 56). The ethical self, Fillion contends, "needs to work on itself . . . in order to give that self a kind of shape that, recognized as admirable or worthy, can then truly be called one's own (in the sense of being distinct from others)" (p. 56). But the ability to do this self-creative ethical act is limited for the poor and working-class. There is no working-class discourse of artistic self-creation and resistance to hegemonic forces trying to impose an ethos upon us. For working-class academics, then, is the possibility of ethical practice illusive?

Perhaps that question can be answered by examining how class is encoded on our bodies. As Chapman (2005b) found in her explorations of how her body had been upper-middle-classed and *Imperialized*: "Class seemed to come first, and other categories of identity were subsumed into it" (p. 266). The genealogy of her *body* was created by first encoding her class. Class is, therefore, corporealized and confirmed in the discourses and practices of culture. As a product of Britain's upper-middle class, Chapman (2005b) found it "impossible to think one was *not* better than anyone else in the world" (p. 271). And for me, I have found it impossible *not* to think of myself as less deserving than my peers, as having to continually justify my existence in university [cult]ure (a space of the middle-class) in both work and school. Chapman describes her inscribed, imperial body

as Victoria Sponge Cake—a delicate, rich, glorious symbol of England, with creamy layers of sexy texture and taste, savored in a lovely back garden, served on delicate bone china, accompanied by golden Darjeeling stirred with a silver spoon. When reading her lovely description, if you strain just a bit, you can almost hear the classical music—

Baroque, I think, yes, Baroque, definitely—gently playing in the background. *I, on the other hand, tend to see myself as a generic pop tart—cheap, stale, full of artificial fruit flavors and gluten—consumed, not for pleasure, but for expedience, eaten on the bus or in the car on the way to a long workday and washed down with bitter, hours-old 7-11 coffee in a Styrofoam cup with a plastic lid. And I don’t even have to strain my ears to hear The Rolling Stones’, “Factory Girl” crackling through busted speakers.*¹

*Waiting for a girl who's got curlers in her hair,
Waiting for a girl she has no money anywhere.
We get buses everywhere.
Waiting for a factory girl.
-- Jagger & Richards*

That is embodied class. Those class self-concepts, I have found, affect the choices of researchers, educators and adult learners in unimaginable ways.

Yet, I contend, this introductory section is an attempt at an ethical [re]evaluation of my classed *body*. It is an investigation of working-class subjectivity and the ethical resistance to imposed, embodied, limitations. It is an analysis of the deconstruction of self and artistic recreation of the body of the researcher. It is a description of my *askesis*, or “the training of the self by oneself” by self-writing (Foucault, 1997, p. 208). It is the

¹ I “*made production*” in a Red Cap sewing factory early in my working life. If you are able to sew a greater number of “bundles” than the designated hourly quota of completed bundles for your job, you can make a few pennies more per hour than the base pay rate—base is minimum wage. To make equal to, or more than, quota is called “making production.”

“shaping of the self” that Foucault (1997, pp. 210-211) describes, by the act of reflecting on practice, an essential precursor to being an ethical adult educator.

Reconstructing Robin the Researcher or The Bird Finally Finds Her Wings

*Visibly shaken by my chance encounter with my inability to imagine earning the privilege of **enjoying** work, dizzied by the force of a sudden confrontation with my self-imposed limitations, I managed to find my way to Carolyn Clark’s home. I was early, and I realized that, but I needed to talk to her. Carolyn has been a mentor and a friend since my initial interview as a potential Ph.D. student. She had recognized then that I was nervous and unsure and had put me at ease. She has a way of seeing into your soul. Scary sometimes. Especially when you think you’re pulling off a well practiced air of confidence and sophistication—and she makes an off-hand comment that reveals that she sees right through it. And I had just written a literature review on life stories of working-class academics for her class. That writing experience had been an epiphanic moment for me and made this experience even more powerful, and my self-recriminations more heartfelt. I **thought** I had been self-reflexive during that reading/writing/learning process and had taken off some working-class blinders. Turns out, I hadn’t even bent them back a bit.*

*Dr. Clark opened the door, invited me in, and said, “What’s on your mind?” without my having to tell her I wanted to talk. I poured out my story, realizing that it sounded like **nothing**, and fearing she would not understand. So I hadn’t thought about doing something outside the formal educational setting for my dissertation? Big deal.*

*Now I have thought about it, so move on. Why the melodrama? It is difficult to convey what you don't understand yourself. I knew that the moment was an important one in my life-long learning journey. But I could hear how insignificant it **sounded**.*

*But she didn't dismiss my story. She took my dilemma seriously. She asked, "What do you do for fun?" When do I have time for fun? I couldn't think. We used to go to rock concerts—but now that it's a three hour drive just to get to a performance, we don't have [make] time to do it anymore. [It has NOTHING to do with age, I'm certain.] I said, "I like rock music, and love to go to concerts." She said, "Maybe you can do something on that?" I laughed and said, "Stories of aging groupies?"—It was a joke. She replied in a gentle, encouraging, **slightly chastising** tone, "Why not?"*

Why not indeed.

*Driving home later that night on the long, dark, isolated two-lane highway back to Nacogdoches, I allowed my anger at myself, at my inability to visualize concepts of work/research outside my working-class parameters, to escape. I denigrated myself—cussed myself out—pounded my fist on the steering wheel—and finally, had a good laugh at my expense. I was such an idiot to think that I had moved forward and could **see** [imagine] unlimited possibilities. How had I imagined I'd removed the manacles, eviscerated the insecurity, disemboweled the dogma of working-class encoded in my subjected self?*

That night I related the incident to Gary, as he loaded Cathy Gale into the DVD player and poured the champagne. I knew he understood. He, too, has had similar inner class-conflicts—battles with oneself in which a truce is sometimes called, but a winner is

never declared. He turned to me and said, “Why don’t you do your dissertation on women’s reaction to Cathy Gale? You’ve only been ranting, raving, and wondering about it for two years.”

*I looked at him in amazement and said weakly, catching my breath, “They’d never let me do that!” He responded, “Sure they will.” Then with a hesitant shrug, “Well, you won’t know unless you ask.” He was right. Despite everything that had happened that day, my initial reaction to the idea of satisfying my own curiosity as a **dissertation** study was to clip my own wings. I decided to investigate the possibility. As we toasted the idea, I felt somehow subversive, a little naughty and wickedly **self-indulgent**. Self-indulgence is something completely foreign to working-class DNA. It made me a feel bit giddy—or could that have been the champagne . . . ?*

Reconceptualizing Adult Learning, Class, and Pedagogy

Working-class academics struggle daily with the fear that someone will find out that they do not belong in academia. Like other working-class people who make up a small percentage of academics, I worry that I’ll be “found out” as working-class (Lawler, 1995, p. 57; Piper, 1995, p. 195 & 295). To succeed in academia, working-class academics must learn to “pass as middle class” (Overall, 1995, p. 215). This desire/need to pass effectively silences us. Academics from the working-class quickly learn that “when you peel away the superficial layers of elitism and anti-labor attitudes that cover many academicians, you unearth a genuinely elitist and anti-working-class essence” (Pelz, 1995, p. 282). Perhaps this is why I failed to imagine a research project that

investigated the pleasures of popular culture. There was certainly a fear that my committee would think the idea *low-class*, despite the fact that I know that they are all critical educators promoting social justice. Class issues are visceral—for everyone.

Moreover, unfortunately, “the patriarchal foundation of our social existence is in fact overlooked in contemporary politics, even [the] leftist politics” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 165) generally associated with the academy. Higher education is not a white/male-constructed world, but a white/male/**middle-to-upper-class-constructed world**. Few women from the working classes inhabit that world. Peckham’s (1995) study found:

Academics with professional/managerial-class origins disproportionately constitute the professorate. Further, the more elite the institution, the higher the percentage of professors who come from the professional and managerial classes; working-class teachers who have managed to slip into the professorate will be more frequently found in community colleges than they will at Berkeley or Harvard. (p. 268)

Higher education is an exclusive club. Few working-class women earn the price of admission, much less can afford the dues. The privilege of class is simply less visible than the privilege of race and gender. As hooks (1993) acknowledges, while a student at Stanford, “it was a kind of treason not to believe that it was better to be identified with the world of material privilege than with the world of the working-class, the poor” (p. 101). Fortunately, hooks realized that “passive acquiescence was not [her] only option. [She] knew that [she] could resist. . . an education designed to provide us with a bourgeois sensibility” (p. 102). Working-class academics are anomalies in the otherwise

flawless facade of the ivory tower. We are outsiders, strangers there—just as we become strangers in our parents’ homes—living in two worlds, belonging in neither.

Untitled

You call it a family reunion, where
 home-cooked chicken and dumplin’s
 are said to be the stuff love is made of –
 and I am supposed to be grateful to
 be thought a failure for
 not being what you expected
 —for not allowing myself to harden
 in the mold where you poured me.
 I try to disguise my betrayal,
 my difference, but it bleeds through,
 like war wounds presented
 to the cock-sure conquering platoon—
 jagged bits of flesh hanging
 wet with life, exposing what is real
 in me to those who demand the unreal.
 Served up with collards and deviled eggs,
 veiled criticisms and disappointed glances
 poorly disguised in patronizing pleasantries
 sprinkled like paprika across the concrete table
 in the merciless Tennessee sun.
 A family [dis]union.

Feeling a separation from where we have been, as well as desperation to **fit in** where we are, working-class academics resist taking chances with new ideas. It might blow our cover. *In my body, I was embarrassed to ask about the possibility of framing this study as my dissertation topic. I experience this blush of shame even now when colleagues—especially the privileged ones—ask me what I’m researching. It feels like an indulgence, something I’m not accustomed to claiming for myself. I worried that my committee would view the idea as “common,” beneath them. In my intellect—my heart*

and mind—I knew this was an important study—a first—groundbreaking. But my body blushed when I first approached my committee members. Pegueros (1995) puts it this way: “Being working-class means never knowing with certainty why someone is laughing at you” (p. 96). She adds, “working-class academics are “never quite sure [they’re] being taken seriously” (p. 104). They learn to “laugh off awkwardness until it hurts” (O’Dair, 1995, p. 204). Living with this “imposter syndrome” (Overall, 1995, p. 215) is a constant reality for working-class in the professorate. It means living in a state of persistent performance—constantly trying to remember your lines—afraid to adlib.

This embodied working-class insecurity also affects how working-class academics define their roles as educators. Many feel that their working-class background made them lean heavily toward the traditional classroom teaching aspect of their jobs (Cappello, 1995; Dews, 1995; Kovacovic, 1995; Lapaglia, 1995; Mazurek, 1995; Peckam, 1995; Pegueros, 1995; Phillips, 1995; Piper, 1995; Schwalbe, 1995; Sumser, 1995). Sumser (1995) explains this characteristic of working-class academics in terms of the philosophy of labor:

I think that working-class people (including working-class intellectuals) see work in terms of [Locke’s] labor theory. Work, then, is about the energy required to transform some raw material [students]. . . . Non-working-class people see work in terms of [Marx’s] exchange theory because their work requires either no raw materials or no transformation of raw materials. (pp. 299-300)

Therefore working-class intellectuals see things in “more concrete terms than non-working-class intellectuals” (p. 300). It is why so many choose community college teaching rather than pursuing positions at Research I institutions.

Labor theory places the impetus for building informed, critical, socially conscientious citizens in the hands of the laborer/teacher. It removes agency from the student/materials. It is a limited view of education and pedagogy specific to working-class ideology. Giroux (2005, p. 13), on the other hand, calls for a deeper understanding of “how culture works as a form of public pedagogy [and] how pedagogy works as a moral and political practice.” His concepts of culture as public pedagogy inform this research as well as my evolving approach to education in general.

As part of my investigation into the possibility of conducting research on contemporaneous viewers of the Cathy Gale *Avengers*, I had to rethink my working-class, embodied concept of *education* as well as my perceptions of the “labor” of research and teaching. I had to pull away from my gut/embodied reactions and work toward internalizing, incorporating, and **corporealizing** what I *knew*. I understood the principles and concepts of self-directed learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, transformational learning, and popular education in my textbooks. I had working knowledge of the discourse of adult education. Yet when I imagined research projects in education, I could only *imagine* working within some form of formalized educational system. I also could only imagine that process as painful for the researcher, because I empathize so strongly with marginalized people. I needed to experience the impact of an informal learning situation, the chance meeting with the beautiful, young, backpacker-

researcher, in order to reflexively reconstitute my classed body. I had been questioning my assumptions since my late twenties and thought I had gotten into a habit of self-reflexivity. But I have found it much easier to reexamine assumptions based on religious dogma and family pressures/instruction, on political ideologies and ingrained racial stereotypes, than on those class ideals embedded in my skin, muscle, bone, and organs. The former is intellectual and can be readily confronted, the latter visceral and almost impossible to recognize without some intense conflict forcing it to consciousness.

Conclusion or Sitting in the Catbird Seat

*It is a poignant irony that wisdom
is too often accompanied by
grey hairs and cellulite,
knees that wrinkle like
long-worn pantyhose and
laugh lines that aren't
all that funny.*

*The confines of class stretch
across my body and memory
like a carnival mirror
distorted, distended by experience
reflecting the knowledge that
I might have been more. . .*

To my utter astonishment, my committee chair approved, even embraced, my choice of dissertation topic, as did the rest of my committee, and I began my quest for answers with that important affirmation. The pussy had the bird in her complete power. It was inevitable. As I began investigating further, there were far too many coincidences for the selection of this topic to be pure chance. Beyond my discovery of the tapes on the evening of my first class at A&M, and the immediate fascination Cathy Gale held for me,

*several incidents uncannily indicated that this was research I was meant to undertake. As I looked at the scriptwriters' names, for example, I was astonished to find that my creative writing professor from the University of Tennessee had written for the show! Now in his eighties and retired from teaching, he lives near my hometown and was delighted to talk with me about his experiences. The first book I ordered on **The Avengers**, happened to be from Amazon Marketplace, where individuals list items for sale, and the seller was the author! The acknowledgement of my order was accompanied by an email from the author who, upon hearing about the study, offered his assistance in several ways, including sending me tapes of **Avengers** episodes not available in the US. This list of coincidences grew to be as extensive as it was uncanny. This study sought me out, seduced both my intellect and my imagination, and I became willing prey.*

*This dissertation is, I believe, a significant piece of research on how adults learn and how they apply that learning to and throughout their lives. In pursuing it, I **did** interview women about their struggles for an education after all, but not necessarily a university education. Completing it has taken perseverance and a considerable amount of tenacity. The financial cost has been great: plane tickets to England, rail tickets (lots of them) to remote parts of England, hotel bills, restaurant bills—all accumulated when the dollar was at a record low against the British pound. The personal costs have been greater: the loss of time with my grandson when he needed me, the onset of headaches and high blood pressure—and, most costly, the possibility of saying goodbye to my mother and the ability to attend her funeral were lost to me while I was in the UK. I have always known that research sometimes requires sacrifice. **But to sacrifice oneself and***

one's interests before beginning would be the real tragedy. I loved doing this research; I loved focusing on a question that had been titillating me for years. This project was an intense learning experience for this researcher. I am changed in many ways—

TRANSFORMED. *I feel more like a phoenix than a robin. I still believe that I must've gotten away with something self-indulgent and decadent. The results of this research project are profound and the implications **matter**, so—perhaps, I did. **But should meaningful work really be so much fun?***

Masturbation

*It's ok to be a black sheep—
 (do they haunt you in your sleep?)
 Swimming in a flood of free thought
 my mind suddenly treads water,
 fighting against a whirlpool that threatens
 to suck potential into an everlasting
 drowning of consciousness.
 Better to dogpaddle in dogma?
) Know my place? (
 Or to sink to the fiery depths of
 self-satisfying consumption lying dormant,
 forbidden, underneath a sea of sanctified verse
that flows across molten desires for knowledge—
 Do I scuttle like Prufrock's ragged claws?
 Never forward?—I will be a black sheep.
 even if they haunt me in my sleep!
 Skinny-dipping **in a pool** of free thought
 Imagining **what I** ought not, . .*

Embodied poetry—Writing as life-savor. Embodied class/sex—Research as resuscitation.

*China, one of the amazing trans-women who participated in this study, abruptly turned to me near the end of our interview and said, “I’m seeing a girl in you—some observations, if you don’t mind? [Robin: Go ahead.] You’re interested in finding true power in yourself. That’s what the real research is. And that’s not a bad thing. It’s what you should do.” China saw what I had, at that time, still failed to recognize in myself. This section of self-writing and **askesis** is a reconstruction of a self-reflexive reevaluation of my classed-self as embodied classed-subject-educator-researcher. I know now that I can learn to indulge my interests and combine that with my commitment to social action and my dedication to making the world a better place. The results will, I hope, benefit the field of adult education, as well. So join me in this journey into the delights of black leather, defiance, and deviation from established norms. You, too, may find yourself getting away with something indulgent and decadent. Perhaps, just perhaps . . .*

Epilogue or Rock and Roll Saved My Life; Cult TV Launched My Career

This dissertation is presented in article format. It seemed the best way to articulate the issues that presented themselves in this study—or, at least, some of them. This bird is not out of the cage yet; I have learned to fly, but have yet to soar. I have more to uncover in the transcripts and documents accumulated over the last few years. But I present the major findings in the articles which follow. Since little research has been done within the discipline of adult education on the impact of popular culture on adult learners, an extensive literature review developed as the first article. Following that

is an article on the overall findings of the study. The next two articles address topics developed from within the larger study. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary of the research and I come back to my working-class roots with a discussion of the **practicality of such research** and its implications for classroom teaching.

I hope you recognize, after you've read the essays

birthed

[I UNDERSTAND PAIN IN CHILDBIRTH—MY DAUGHTER WEIGHED 10 POUNDS AT BIRTH AND STILL CAUSES PAIN AT AGE 25—BUT SHE IS MY GRANDSON'S MOTHER. HE IS MY JOY AND HIS LAUGHTER HAS SUSTAINED ME FOR THESE LAST 4 YEARS.

--[IT'S LIKE THAT, DOING RESEARCH THAT MATTERS. . . .]

*from my meaning-making, learning experiences doing research,
I hope **educators** realize that—*

(Shhhhhh)! [there is possibility for resistance]

GOOD [cult] TV

[define-deconstruct-destabalize-disorient-develop-define-deconstruct ∞]

*—is a **Hobbit!** Shhhhhhh!*

*It's a little, furry-footed **HOPE** for **middle** and working^[class] earth.*

*(It isn't called **CULT** tv for nothin'!)*

Figure 2. My Thought Process

Robin, 2006 →
Brighton, England

Robin, 1963 ↓



*I don't know—it could be me—but I think that
embodied thing is still a problem . . .
I'm working on it . . .*

Figure 2. Comparative Photographs of Me

CULT TV, COMIC-BOOKS, COMEDY AND CONSUMPTION: THE INTRUSIVE, ENTERTAINING IN-LAWS OF THE MARRIAGE OF ADULT EDUCATION AND POP CULTURE

Introduction

Lester (1997) argues that popular culture is “an entry point into social education” (p. 20) and, that as a people, we “learn early and well from mass media” (Lester, 1997, p. 20). This proposition is widely accepted in many academic fields, including cultural studies, media studies, and communications. Within the broad discipline of education, examinations of popular culture and its use in classrooms, as well as popular culture as “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000) – a term which refers to the educational force of popular media – have mainly played out in curriculum studies and critical media education, and have typically been confined to the K-12 schooling system and to the study of children and youth.

I take as the beginning point for this paper, however, that the study of popular culture, and especially its manifestation as “cultural studies,” actually has its roots in adult education, not in the activism of the 1960s, as many scholars have claimed (Woodhams, 1999). Woodhams (1999) believes that the “revival of lifelong learning” in the field of cultural studies should be challenged by the “hidden history of adult education,” (p. 237) and contends that “work on past struggles in adult education may yet offer guidance on how to carry on negotiating in the future” (p. 247). Giroux (1994) concurs when, through his review of cultural studies literature, he argues the case for

“the importance of pedagogy as a central aspect of cultural studies” (p. 131). Both Woodams and Giroux assert that adult education recognized and utilized the study of popular culture for improving critical pedagogical practices *before* the founding in 1964 of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies in England, which for many scholars marks the beginning of the academic discipline of cultural studies (Barker, 2004). In fact, many of the early cultural studies scholars were adult educators, including Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson (Steele, 1994). Miller (1999), too, points out that cultural studies took root in adult education yet, she adds, to date “there is little evidence of insights from cultural and media studies being applied to the study of adult education” (p. 3). I believe it is time for adult educators to reclaim the study of popular culture, and to take cultural studies back into the bosom of adult education.

In what follows, I outline a review of the literature on the research and practice of the intersection between popular culture and adult learning and development. I begin by defining popular culture and providing a context for this discussion of the literature. Next, I offer a *brief* overview of some of the literature from education researchers investigating popular culture’s influence on the education of children, adolescents and teens. I then provide a comprehensive look at how the academic discipline of adult education has approached the study of popular culture. I argue that while there has been excellent work occurring around popular culture within the field of adult education, and that while this line of work is currently gaining renewed momentum, adult educators and researchers need to persist in vigorous exploration of the intersections of popular culture,

adult education, and adult learning.

Perspectives on Popular Culture

It is reasonable to expect that I should begin with a definition of “popular culture” but, as will be shown in this review, researchers take different approaches to, and adopt a variety of different definitions of, popular culture. Defining “popular culture” is, as Gaztambide-Fernández, Harding, and Sordé-Martí (2004) assert, an “elusive task” (p. 229). Storey (1996) offers some guidance here, as he presents several definitions that are used by researchers in the field. Popular culture can be viewed as (1) “inferior culture,” or what is left over after we have removed “high culture” (p. 5), (2) commercial culture produced for mass consumption, (3) folk culture created by “authentic” working-class people, (4) an arena for the reproduction of dominant ideology, (5) an arena for power struggles between dominant and subordinate social groups, and (6) a site of pleasure and identity formation.

The first definition is grounded in the “culture and civilization” tradition, and represents the viewpoints of cultural theorists such as Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis (Storey, 1998). In Arnold’s view, culture was defined as “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (cited in Storey, 1998, p. 3). Arnold introduced the “high culture/low culture” binary opposition, which dominated studies of culture from the 1860s until the 1950s (Storey, 2006). This perspective on culture values “high culture” and discards “popular culture,” or working-class culture, as inferior, uncivilized, and

unworthy of attention. For Arnold, working-class or popular culture represented cultural decline, a “breakdown in social and cultural authority” (Storey, 2006, p. 3).

The second definition, popular culture as produced for mass-consumption, draws upon the first definition. Those viewing popular culture through this lens see it as a “hopelessly commercial culture” that is “formulaic” and “manipulative,” and consumed by passive, “brain-numbed” consumers (Storey, 2006, p. 6). Authors writing from what Storey calls the “mass culture perspective” typically contrast mass culture with some previously lost “golden age” where culture was more pure and less commercially corrupted (Storey, 2006, p. 6).

The third definition focuses on popular culture as culture that is not imposed from above, but which, instead, “originates with the people” (Storey, 2006, p. 7). This definition is grounded in the “culturalism” tradition, which arose as a reaction to the “culture and civilization” tradition and which was instrumental in the launching of the academic field of cultural studies. Within this perspective, popular culture is seen as folk culture, and refers to the “authentic” culture of working-class peoples. This perspective focuses on the active *production* rather than the passive *consumption* of culture (Storey, 2006), and asserts that by analyzing the culture of a society, it is possible to understand the behavior and ideas shared by individuals to produce and consume that culture. Here, popular culture is conceived of as both texts and practices—the everyday lived experiences of individuals.

The fourth definition represents a structuralist approach, wherein popular culture is viewed as a “sort of ideological machine which more or less effortlessly reproduces

the dominant ideology” (Storey, 2006, p. 7). Viewers are seen as passive absorbers of hegemonic messages with little power or agency to resist or negotiate meanings.

Frankfurt School Marxists also adhere to this view of culture, with their stance that the “culture industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) produces mass culture and imposes it upon a passive audience; popular culture thus helps to “maintain social authority” (Storey, 2006, p. 49). In addition, sociologists interested in cultural capital and cultural transmission also focus on the role of popular culture in social reproduction. For instance, Bourdieu (1996) contends that a product such as a television show, and particularly a television news program and/or sports coverage, has the power to shape cultures. He believes that the financially powerful elite who own—and dictate the content of—the airwaves are intricately connected to the political elite who mandate public policy and regulate lives. He further argues that television is a political tool of despots, demagogues, and democracies alike. Failing to recognize the power of television over viewers ignorant of the “mechanisms” behind what is shown, according to Bourdieu, is a serious mistake on the part of educators and those seeking social change.

The fifth definition builds upon the views of the “culturalists,” and is grounded in a “Gramscian” cultural studies framework. This view sees popular culture as a site of hegemonic contestation. This perspective does not simply equate popular culture with the passive consumption of the *cultural commodities* and *commodified experiences and practices* (which include film, fashion, television, music, sports, etc.) provided by the culture industries, rather, it conceptualizes it as an active process, wherein cultural

commodities and experiences are the *raw materials* used to *create* popular culture (Storey, 1999). Individuals are seen as active participants in culture; they engage with and create culture as they select, reject, make meaning from, attribute value to, resist, and are also sometimes manipulated by cultural commodities. Further, from this perspective, what matters about popular culture is its *politics*, or the ways in which culture intersects with *power* (Bennett, 1998; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992; Storey, 1996). Focusing on issues of power thus highlights how popular culture is a site of conflict, where struggles play out between dominant and resistant forces in society. Feminist media scholars such as van Zoonen (1994), for instance, reject the idea that women television viewers are unilaterally oppressed by the hegemonic forces behind popular media images of women. She found that:

Audiences are no longer seen as positioned or interpellated by media texts, subjected to the vicious intentions of patriarchal power and ideology, but are considered to be active producers of meaning, interpreting and accommodating media texts to their own daily lives and culture. (pp. 149-150)

Audiences may sometimes use popular culture as an instrument of positive change, especially in certain circumstances and historical moments. Some feminist cultural studies scholars have recognized the distance between feminist literature and working- and middle-class women; many have begun conducting research on television programs, like soap operas, that are aimed at, and primarily viewed by, women (Brown, 2004; Brundson, D'Acci, & Spigel, 2003; Brunsdon, 2000). They found that women may be

empowered, rather than oppressed, by representations of women on soap operas, often reading the characters as sites of resistance and change.

Gramsci (1971) believed in the possibility of the transformative power of popular culture and felt it could—and should—be used for social change. He saw the hegemonic structures of popular culture as an essential focus for action on a large scale. As Mayo (1999) points out:

Gramsci's focus on both aspects of the 'high' and 'low' cultural divide occurs as part of a constant search for a synthesis of potentially emancipatory elements found in both spheres. . . . Gramsci laments the deterioration of serial fiction in Italy and argues that the proletariat should develop this form of popular cultural production This literature must have been considered by Gramsci capable of providing working class members with a set of meanings relevant to the revolutionary project he had in mind. (p. 50)

Adult educators promoting social action are often drawn to this Gramscian view of the potential of popular culture to promote change.

Finally, the sixth definition draws upon more postmodern perspectives of culture and no longer makes distinctions between high and low culture. Cultural theorists such as Lyotard, Baudrillard, and Jameson began to pay more attention to the practice of popular culture in everyday life, as well as the experience of audiences, the pleasures associated with consuming and negotiating popular culture meanings, and identity construction through production and consumption of popular culture (Guins & Cruz, 2005; Kellner & Durham, 2001). For instance, White (1983), a media and

communications scholar, rejects the negative, deterministic stance Bourdieu and others adopt toward popular culture. He argues that to view audiences as only acted-upon by the messages inscribed in their favorite television programs, rather than critically participating in negotiating those messages, is to insult the viewers and to ignore their critical awareness.

Each of these perspectives has distinctive implications for approaching the study of popular culture within adult education, and for the practice of incorporating popular culture within adult education contexts. I will use this background as my foundation for analyzing and discussing the literature on popular culture within adult education contexts.

K-12 Schooling and Popular Culture

As stated previously, when scholars within the broader field of education have taken up the study of popular culture, this work has typically been conducted within the K-12 arena. I will, therefore, briefly address this body of literature before turning to a more detailed discussion of how adult education researchers have approached the study of popular culture.

Giroux (1994) is one of the leading K-12 scholars advocating that educators take popular culture seriously, both inside and outside formal classroom settings. He states:

For years, I believed that pedagogy was a discipline developed around the narrow imperatives of public schooling. And yet, my identity has been largely fashioned outside of school. Films, books, journals, videos, and music in different and

significant ways did more to shape my politics and life than did my formal education, which always seemed to be about somebody else's dreams. (p. x)

In the K-12 literature, I found that most scholars studying popular culture share this appreciation for the educational impact of popular culture. However, my review of the literature revealed three different approaches to the application of popular culture to K-12 education. First, popular culture is viewed as a tool to reach students in the classroom, because it is deemed a way to connect with students and to understand how they relate to material presented to them. This approach to popular culture draws upon postmodern perspectives, focusing primarily on how youth derive pleasure from popular culture and how youth identity is created and maintained through popular culture.

Within this approach to popular culture, educators are urged to maintain an awareness of the popular cultural influences that interest and entertain their students, so teachers can provide instruction that is considered relevant by their students. Some scholars (Cortes, 2004; Gee, 1999; Giroux & Simon, 1989b) believe that K-12 educators must recognize and utilize the power pop culture wields in the lives of their students if they are to fulfill a meaningful role in the education of young people. Mahiri (2000-2001, p. 385) warns:

If schooling is to survive. . . teachers [must] continue to become more aware of the motives and methods of youth engagement in pop culture in terms of why and how such engagement connects to students' personal identifications, their needs to construct meanings, and their pursuit of pleasures and personal power. Teachers should explore how work in schools can make similar connections to students' lives, but the real challenge is to make these connections to and through

changing domains of knowledge, critical societal issues, and cognitive and technical skills that educators can justify their students will actually need to master the universe of the new century.

Mahiri also calls for a new curriculum based on “pop culture pedagogy” that uses “modes of transmission (e.g., TV, the Internet, video games, music compact discs, movies) that are capable of presenting a variety of textual forms like print, pictures, drawings, animation and sound” (Mahiri, 2000-2001, p. 382). Young people are utilizing all these popular culture technologies, as well as picture phones, text messaging, email, My Space, etc. in their learning lives. All are used to transmit and receive texts, photographs, drawings, etc. among peers and family. Educators who want to become and remain relevant, as well as those who want to help determine what is being absorbed and incorporated into students’ constructions of learning must, themselves, learn to adapt such technologies both inside and outside the classroom.

Second, other researchers in the K-12 disciplines have approached popular culture as a way to make learning more relevant for students, but do so in a more critical way. Instead of simply using popular culture in an apolitical way to “reach” students with relevant content matter, these researchers advocate the use of popular culture as a tool to foster critical media literacy inside the classroom, and view popular culture as a site where hegemony is reproduced as well as resisted. Educators approaching popular culture from this perspective see it as a space where learners are taught hegemonic ways of being in the world, as popular culture helps to foster particular points of view on race, class, gender and sexuality that serve the oppressive status quo. However, critical

educators who view popular culture from this perspective also highlight student agency and call upon students and teachers to become co-creators of their own knowledge and identities. Critical educators wishing to foster critical pedagogy in classrooms call upon teachers to help learners deconstruct the messages about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other positionalities that are prevalent in mass media, and encourage educators and students to become critical consumers of mass media. For instance, writing from the perspective of critical multicultural education, Cortes (2004, p. 222) calls on scholars to “explicitly investigate the relationship between media and school multi-cultural knowledge construction.” He insists that “scholarship on and proposals for implementing multicultural education have failed to effectively engage the existence, persistence, and power of the media as a multicultural educator, including its implications for multicultural schooling” (p. 224). He also points out that “audiences learn not only from programs intended to inform, but also from media presumably designed merely to entertain” (p. 212). Miller and McHoul (1998) acknowledge pop culture’s impact on middle-school students and have conducted studies that link adolescent viewers’ political differences to various elements of the popular culture they consume, including their preferences among television dramas.

Adolescent literacy scholars (Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006) encourage the use of comic-books and manga (Japanese graphic novels) to promote literacy in the US. The appeal of graphic reading materials (comics, graphic novels, manga) for middle and secondary school literacy programs has global appeal. Kruger and Shariff (2001) found the use of student-produced “life-skills” comics

invaluable for teaching important life lessons, such as AIDS prevention instruction, in a rural South African secondary school. They call such comics “edutaining graphic stories.” Film, television, video games and rap music are all recognized by critical educators as effective tools for teaching political awareness and cultural diversity—critical literacies—to contemporary adolescent students (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Morrell, 2002, 2004; Nixon & Comber, 2001).

In addition, Gruber and Boreen (2003) have shown that adolescent popular literature, like Roald Dahl’s 1983 novel, *The Witches*, can be an effective pop cultural tool when used to teach critical thinking and to promote both learning and reading skills in middle schools and college classrooms alike (Gruber & Boreen, 2003). Using this text Gruber and Boreen were able to engage both adolescents and adult college women in discussions and writing that led to increased awareness of gender issues, the effects of stereotyping, and the impact popular culture wields on individual lives.

Finally, popular culture is also seen as a site of learning and identity formation outside the classroom—that is, it is seen as a site of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000). Many educators writing from this perspective draw upon a Gramscian view of popular culture, adopting the idea that popular culture is both a site where reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic values and practices occurs. However, in practice, most educators examining public pedagogy have focused more on popular culture’s reproductive functions than they have on its possibilities for resistance. For instance, educators have focused on how popular culture serves to reproduce hegemonic values and practices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, machismo and violence,

and “the reconstruction of childhood innocence for the gratification of adult desire” (Mayo, 2002, p. 197). Moreover, teachers are as susceptible to those hegemonic forces as their students. Too often, teachers become instruments of those hegemonic forces by internalizing those messages and incorporating them into their classroom practices. Anijar’s (2000) qualitative study of that phenomenon provides a provocative caveat for teachers who are *Star Trek* fans or Trekkers. Her study found that many educators are not self-reflexive enough to realize the hegemonic forces at work in *Star Trek*. She posits that:

Star Trek is a Space Western with all the cultural and ideological baggage that such a connection implies. Six-shooters are pawned for phasers and the Wild Frontier morphs into the Final Frontier. The Ponderosa evolves into the Starship Enterprise and Ben Cartwright is reincarnated as James Tiberius Kirk. In this configuration, Adam turns into Mr. Spock and Hop Sing reemerges as Mr. Sulu. These connections are possible only with a cultural phenomenon that repackages the same ideologies that covertly shaped the American TV and movie Western shoot-em-up. (p. ix)

She warns that *Star Trek* is the doctrine of manifest destiny retold with all its Eurocentric, ethnocentric, racist, supremacist connotations and false moral certitude. In *Star Trek*, according to Anijar, “the emergent faith in American technological genius, wedded to the older faith in America’s manifest destiny, engenders ascetic visions that would enable America to defeat all evil empires, wage war to end all wars, and make the

world eternally safe for democracy” (p. 229). Her interviews with teachers revealed how those myths were being reproduced in classroom instruction.

Anijar’s research on the belief systems of trekker teachers should give one pause. It should also reinforce my assertion that popular culture is a force in adult lives that needs to be seriously investigated as a place of pedagogy. Adult educators need to know what passions drive our students’ deep-seated beliefs about the world. More often than not, those views are not built upon what they have learned in the classroom but, as Giroux (1994) revealed about his own education, are derived from their favorite television shows and other popular culture products that have taken root in their political and social consciousnesses.

Educators studying public pedagogy have conducted empirical studies of a variety of sites of public pedagogy, including the products and practices of corporations such as Calvin Klein (Giroux, 1997), Bennetton (Giroux, 1994), Disney (H. A. Giroux, 1999) and McDonald’s (Kincheloe, 2002); and the content and ideologies of films including *GhostWorld* (Giroux, 2003), *Dirty Dancing* (Aronowitz, 1989; Giroux & Simon, 1989a), and *Fight Club* (Giroux, 2001).

Review of Adult Education Literature on Popular Culture

I will now turn to an exploration of how the discipline of adult education has engaged with popular culture. Since popular culture studies inception and birth in adult education, little research has been done on the discipline’s love-child. It is time for a shotgun wedding. After all, both disciplines have matured; they have flirted with one

another. That flirtation has led to some research—a few affairs with love-children of their own. That off-spring has convinced most adult education theorists that popular culture has some effect on people’s worldviews. Graham (1989, p. 160), for example, cautions adult educators to help students “become progressively emancipated from the spell of media’s construction of reality.” He issues a mandate to adult educators to “stimulate intellect and imagination so that adults may be enabled to move towards understanding the workings of culture and power in their lives” (p. 160). That exhortation has broad implications, and further research must be conducted to investigate those implications further. The time for illicit rendezvous is passed.

The pre-nuptial agreement has already been negotiated. While agreeing with Graham that adult educators have a responsibility to aid students with what he calls “ideological detoxification,” Brookfield (1986, p. 151) cautions against an “overly pessimistic imbalance caused by overestimating the power the media has over our lives.” He cites Kennedy’s argument that,

we should balance our view of television [and other forms of popular culture] as an all-pervasive, controlling agent with the awareness that we are active appropriators, selecting our own meanings out of all the myriad forces to which we are exposed, including television, in our particular historical and social contexts. (p. 186)

Certainly the devices and technologies of popular culture have unlimited potential to control, to misinform, to regulate, and to manipulate at particular historical moments within specific hegemonic paradigms. However, the reverse may also be true. Those

who view media as *only* “monolithic transmitters of a dominant ideology uncritically assimilated by an audience of passive dupes” fail to “allow for elements of resistance and opposition within the media and consider media producers and workers to be robotic automatons working at the behest of ruling elites” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 154). Just as Gramsci (1971) recognized the power of popular fiction in his quest for the social transformation of Western Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, adult educators must recognize the power contemporary popular culture has to transform lives and to initiate and promote social change.

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out that Knowles offered five assumptions about adult learners in his model of adult learning, that distinguished them from young learners. They interpret Knowles’ model of an adult learner as 1) learning through independent self-direction; 2) learning through accumulated life experiences; 3) having a readiness to learn as determined by social roles; 4) having a desire for immediate application of acquired knowledge; and 5) having internal motivation to learn. One internal motivator for engaging with popular culture might be the desire for pleasure and fun; nevertheless, adults approach their interactions with popular cultural products through lenses made from accumulated life experiences and construct meaning from the whole. Whether intentional or not, adults learn from the practice of cultural consumption in their everyday lives. Jarvis (P. Jarvis, 1992) put it this way, “the process of learning is located at the interface of people’s biography and the sociocultural milieu in which they live, for it is at this intersection that experiences occur” (p. 17). Self-directed learning or “learning on one’s own has been the primary mode of [that aspect of] learning in

adulthood throughout the ages” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 288). Adults learn about what interests them.

Moreover, Miller (2000a) notes that adult education has long recognized the concept that adults learn from experience. She claims that it is a common assumption throughout the discipline that adults “learn throughout their lives, from their work and leisure, from their experience in social and domestic contexts, and from their personal relationships” (p. 72). Yet, she concedes that “attention has tended to be given in theoretical writing and in empirical studies to learning which takes place in formal educational settings” (p. 72). She calls on adult educators to “concern themselves with learning from experience and on the meaning of the growing emphasis on experiential learning for the practice of adult education in postmodern times” (p. 83). She believes it is time for “fresh theoretical models” that incorporate research on the learning that takes place in “the home, the workplace, and cyberspace” (p. 83). To this point, adult education literature that addresses the issue of the influence of popular culture has focused on four areas of research and practice: representations of adult learning and adult development in popular media, self-reflexive practices of adult educators who consume popular culture, effective classroom practices involving the popular, and the impact of consumers’ learning from popular culture. In the following sections, I will summarize the literature in each of these four areas of inquiry.

Representations of Adult Learning and Adult Development in Popular Culture

Pomerantz and Benjamin (2000) take up Miller's charge and challenge the very foundation of traditional adult developmental theories by examining the texts of various television situation comedies about the lives of adults. They point to the adult characters on *Home Improvement*, *The Drew Carey Show*, and *Seinfeld* as examples that "obviously contravene the more traditional representations of adulthood, thus illustrating its instability." Based on representations of adults in various TV sit-coms, they argue that "the epistemological foundations of adulthood must be brought into the fore and challenged as social construction." Developmental theories of adulthood, "as a hard and fast concept, is now moot." The very definition of what it means to be an adult has changed; therefore, adult education theories must evolve to encompass that expanded definition. The importance of pop culture representations of adulthood should not be overlooked by adult educators. Television programs, even sit-coms, often reflect the reality of cultural changes not obvious in our lived experience.

Other adult education researchers have investigated popular culture as sites that offer viewers representations of adult learning. Jarvis (2005) examined one traditional adult learning theory, self-directed or life-long learning, as it is represented in an icon of popular culture—the American TV show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She found that, while traditional formal education merely frustrated the characters' efforts to save the world, self-directed adult learning "is literally life—without it they die" (p. 43). Yet it is clear in the text that this pursuit of life-long learning is also painful, difficult and often

forbidden. The characters, however, are driven to pursue self-directed learning, despite the agony that the acquisition of knowledge brings. She concludes:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer [BtVS] offers an interpretation of how, in a morally complex universe, lifelong learning and increased knowledge and power are used by individuals, communities and social groups. It offers a moral analysis of education and empowerment and indicates that learners and teachers need to make situated and sometimes lateral, emotional and intuitive decisions about the best courses of action. It poses challenges to some aspects of government thinking with respect to lifelong learning and complements and represents other approaches, particularly those of radical and post-modern thinkers. (p. 44)

BtVS offers its viewers a powerful lesson on the critical need for lifelong learning. The fact that the show has a large cult following indicates that its radical view of self-acquired knowledge and its resultant power strikes a cord with its international viewing audience.

With the current popularity of “reality” shows, adult learning is not simply represented in the abstract—it is often the basis for the program. Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards (2005) investigate what they call “televisual narratives of change” (p. 2). They examine the self-directed learning projects represented in television programs that encourage, even “teach,” participants—and viewers—to be different. Programs like *What Not to Wear*, *Wife Swap*, *10 Years Younger*, *Changing Rooms*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* encourage people to reinvent themselves in various ways. They “represent a different type of programming from more traditional didactic shows,

encouraging the viewer to engage with and become immersed in the actual transformation of others rather than be the passive recipients of the home truths of experts” (p. 2). The appeal of these shows is obviously widespread. They proliferate across cable and networks alike. Miller, Armstrong, and Edwards locate these programs within the realm of lifelong learning and highlight the relationship between learning and identity development.

Popular Culture and Educator Self-Reflexivity

Others argue that adult educators should use popular culture as a tool for fostering self-reflexive pedagogical practice. Miller (N. Miller, 1999) insists that “it is increasingly important for educators to take seriously the processes by which media texts are produced and disseminated, and to understand the ways in which media images and constructions pervade all our lives” (p. 6). Since media texts, like *Seinfeld*, she points out, help adults make sense of their own experiences, adult educators need to engage with popular media “in order to strengthen their theoretical understanding and enhance their practice” (p. 7). She advocates for interrogating our reactions to popular culture products and shows how intricately popular culture narratives are entwined with our lived experiences. Miller (2000b) also promotes the use of one’s personal engagement with popular culture to “understand personal experience and to analyze subjectivities and identities” (p. 1) that inform our work as adult educators. According to her, “autobiographical reflection has increasingly come to feature in the practice of adult educators with the growth in the use of mechanisms to document and accredit life

experience and prior learning, and in the use of learning diaries and portfolios” (p. 1). She asserts that it is important to use those mechanisms to “engage with the processes by which media texts are produced and disseminated and to understand the ways in which media images and representations pervade all our lives” (p. 1). Adult educators must take seriously “the texts and pleasures of popular culture” (p. 1). This self-journaling approach to analyzing the effects of popular culture helps adult educators investigate their own adult learning through autobiographical narratives that reveal the intertextuality of life experiences and one’s engagement with popular culture.

Edwards and Miller (2000) illustrate this autobiographical reflection in their analysis of their personal experiences as they are informed by “the artifacts of popular culture as well as by more conventional sources” (p. 126). They stress the need for this kind of comprehensive self-reflexive autobiography for adult educators who wish to be effective and relevant in this age of postmodernity. As they point out:

As the sense of bounded identity is ruptured, so are the boundaries between, for instance, education, training, business, entertainment, culture and leisure. New and different forms of teaching and learning are developed, as innovation and flexibility displace the repetitions of the enlightened pedagogue. People’s sense of place is no longer tied to immediate locality, as the space they may occupy and the learning available to them are increasingly subject to compression and, through the expansion of electronic communications, virtual and placeless. (p. 130)

It is essential for today's adult educators to reflect on their own engagement with popular culture, as well as that of their students, or they may allow themselves to be displaced by it. Otherwise, they may find themselves with no place/space in which to facilitate learning because they are too far removed from the lived experiences of the adults they seek to instruct.

Armstrong (2005) calls on adult educators to explore the connections between political awareness and popular culture when discussing the animated TV comedy, *The Simpsons*. The intelligent political satire embedded in *The Simpsons* represents “the infiltration of everyday life in political critique that leads us to question the nature of democracy” (p. 7). He suggests that a critical analysis of the show will help “develop our intellectual capacities for making sense of the complex and contradictory ideologies” that make up our political systems (p. 7).

As Armstrong (2005) points out, political literacy is often a primary goal of adult education; political apathy is often rampant among adult education students. *The Simpsons* could be developed as an antidote to learner apathy because its fans choose to “consume politics” as part of their everyday life. The clever satire awakens interest. Armstrong points out that the writers “target hypocrisy, corruption and institutionalized laziness wherever it finds them, being cheerfully vicious to whoever the writers think deserves it” (p. 11). As adult educators make sense of the ideologies in *The Simpsons*, they will be better able to convey the reality of those ideologies in the classroom. Cultivating the *habit* of deconstructing and analyzing popular culture texts will help adult educators hone their critical analysis skills.

Popular Culture as Effective Classroom Practice

Obviously, the power of popular culture to aid educator self-reflexivity is intimately connected to classroom practices. While, as Armstrong claims, some viewers may lack the degree of media literacy and political awareness to fully appreciate the satire in *The Simpsons*, adult educators can certainly utilize the show's potential to increase their own political awareness. It may be possible to use it as a vehicle for introducing issues and for facilitating both critical media consumption and political literacy in their students (Armstrong, 2005). Tisdell and Thompson (2005) argue that "because adult learners are large consumers of entertainment media, critical media studies/literacy have a role to play in adult education. It is especially relevant in teaching about diversity and equity" (p. 425). Tisdell and Thompson, in their study of adult learners in graduate school, found that "entertainment media has at least some effect on how all of us continue to 'learn' about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, both as passive consumers and as active meaning makers" (p. 430). The advocate for more emphasis on media literacy with "active viewing and discussion and deconstruction of character portrayals both in [educators'] individual lives and as teachers of adults in classrooms" (p. 430). Many adult educators take a Gramscian view of the potential of popular culture for affecting social change. For this reason some adult educators call for engagement with the popular culture products that students consume, and for critically examining how those products are impacting student learning. This may, indeed, be essential for those involved with urban adult education, for example. Guy (2004) points out that "urban adult education is imprinted with and shaped by the cultural and

ideological representations of blackness in the development and delivery of programs and services” (p. 53). He believes these representations are primarily negative and prohibit the creation of culturally relevant and, therefore, more meaningful ways of educating urban, African-American adults. His research indicates that the “culture gap” between most adult educators and urban adult learners is too broad and this adversely affects the learning environment. This gap will be bridged only if educators engage in self-reflexive critical media literacy by studying hip-hop culture, the major cultural influence on their student population. Gangsta rap and hip-hop culture are, in part, popular critiques of the political and social realities faced by urban youth and adults. Those realities must be understood and their cultural products utilized to create a culturally relevant curriculum.

Price, Jr. (2005) agrees with Guy. He argues that “as long as a cultural gap exists between providers of adult education working in urban contexts and the students, the needs of adult learners will not be met” (p. 345). He likens the importance of the emergence of hip-hop culture to the counter-hegemonic forces that led to the Harlem Renaissance. Hip-hop is paramount to urban, Black culture and cannot be ignored by educators working with urban adults. For example, the misogynistic, male-centered, nature of hip-hop culture must be understood as it is internalized by both male and female consumers of it. Only with such understanding can adult educators make their curriculum relevant.

As a result of his research into the affective needs of urban adult learners, Guy (1999) calls for adult educators to make their practices culturally relevant to their

students. He argues that “culturally relevant adult education is essential to helping learners from marginalized cultural backgrounds learn to take control of their lives and improve their social condition” (p. 5). Some adult education researchers have focused on popular culture as a portal for learning in formal adult education spaces. Jarvis (1999) studied the transformative power of using popular romance novels in the cultural studies classroom with mature women in an Access to Higher Education program in the UK. She offers empirical evidence that cultural studies can make significant contributions to transformative adult education. The women’s discussions of popular romance novels “led to a critical awareness of the capacity of romantic discourses to shape their understanding of themselves and their relationships in ways which have considerable implications for power in relationships” (p. 116). This study led to a subsequent one which investigated the reading histories of adult returning college women. That research connected their experiences with college texts to their leisure reading practices (C. Jarvis, 2000).

Marshall’s (2001) research provides evidence that older students who were enrolled in community college developmental reading and writing courses benefited greatly from the educators’ use of an icon of popular culture, the various generations of the cult TV program *Star Trek*, as vehicle for promoting and developing critical thinking skills. He found that the ability to critically analyze the moral dilemma’s facing the crew of the starship Enterprise, translated into an ability to critically analyze and write about issues facing adults today. He concludes that “using a popular culture frame of reference

to stimulate a critical-thinking process is a valid teaching tool when properly inserted into existing curriculum” (p. 99). He goes on to point out that

Adult learners reference popular culture in a search for meaning in their lives.

The adult learner seeks interpretation of events, and adult learning can validate or put into perspective those life experiences. A formal program of study can enhance and fine-tune the adult learner’s quest for insight and enlightenment. (p. 104)

He found the use of *Star Trek* to be a portal through which adult community college students developed necessary critical thinking skills for college success. This contrasts sharply with Anjar’s research on K-12 teachers’ self-directed learning from the show, which exposed the oppressive hegemonic forces of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and manifest destiny embedded in viewer-teachers’ incorporations of *Star Trek* mythology. Those teachers’ engagement with *Star Trek* negatively impacted their ability to critically analyze media or American culture, and made it impossible for them to recognize a need for social change or to promote liberatory thinking in their classrooms. In fact, the teachers’ trekker philosophies reproduced those oppressive forces in their classrooms. Marshall’s use of *Star Trek* with adult learners, on the other hand, was facilitated by his textual interpretation as a critical educator intent on raising awareness of a variety of social issues. The contrasting results are striking evidence for more involvement by adult educators and researchers in facilitating learning through popular culture and for further investigations of the power of the popular to instruct.

Popular phenomena like *Star Trek* can span generations of fans and be used for educating adults, increasing literacy and promoting social action agendas. Another extremely popular cultural phenomenon which operates from a mythic fantasy world and appeals to consumers of all ages is the world of witches, wizards, trolls, giants, elves, and a host of other fantastic beings that inhabit the world of Hogwarts and the trials of a boy named Harry Potter. Research conducted by Bambas (2002) on adult literacy students found that using the popular *Harry Potter* novels for teaching adult literacy enabled adults to learn to read and write while building self-esteem. They related to the family difficulties experienced by the characters; they learned to use their imaginations to *try out* solutions to problems in Harry's world, as well as in their own. Reading *Harry Potter* also facilitated lively classroom discussions on issues of race, class, and gender from a position where marginalized adults in basic literacy classes felt safe—the world of fantasy and fun. Yet those produced discussions developed essential critical thinking skills, and facilitated heightened political and social awareness in the adult students she observed and interviewed. Use of the *Harry Potter* books also correlated with an increase in the adult students' interactions with their own children, which expanded the benefits of their acquired literacy and critical thinking skills in untold directions.

Educators' descriptions of effective practice support this research on the benefits of using popular culture to promote learning. Norton-Meier (2005) has found that using clips from the popular *Harry Potter* movies, as well as comic book movies like *X-Men* stimulates critical thinking and promotes engaged writing about social and political issues in her undergraduate and graduate education classes. She teaches her students

that “when we connect literacy to popular culture, our students can understand difficult content in new ways, as well as learn to question the media they are presented with on a daily basis” (p. 611). Likewise, Tisdell and Thompson (2006) found that using the film *Crash* to stimulate discussion in adult education classrooms led to deeper analysis of issues surrounding diversity in education.

Timpson (2002), a critical educator and peace activist, advocates using films like *Basketball Diaries* and *Amistad* which can “augment instruction in engaging and dramatic ways, providing students with powerful images and sounds, and a shared classroom experience that can serve as a reference point for learning, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation” (p. 112). He also incorporates music, television, and other forms of popular culture into his classroom practices in an effort to teach peace, particularly after the events of September 11, 2001. He feels an urgency to reach students with messages of activism and has found that using popular culture products adds impact to his message of peace through political action.

The Effects of Popular Culture on Adult Learners

Too few researchers have focused on the actual self-directed learning experiences of adults as they engage with popular culture. Yet, Aslanian and Brickell (1982) insist that, “We have become a society in which adults learn everywhere. It is not simply that some adult learning takes place outside formal education institutions; it is that most of it does” (p. 159). For those born after 1949, for example, television, in particular, has been a pervasive influence on their lives (Flexner & Soukhanov, 1997, p.

348). This form of popular culture represents a significant percentage of our interaction with popular culture. Our choices for viewing become part of our identity. People often identify themselves by what television programs they watched as adolescents (Flexner & Soukhanov, 1997). According to Barrow & Milburn (1990, p. 201), there is

no doubt we may take it as established that television sometimes does put ideas (good or bad) into people's heads. But it is equally certain that it can help people become more critical (even of the ideas it implants), by providing information, argument, and example. It can also promote awareness of and evoke sensitivity to issues. . . . This raises other questions such as how one determines worth and quality in the various media, how one determines moral truth, whether some media are more prone to indoctrination than others, and whether censorship can be justified. Nonetheless, there seems no reason to regard the mass media a priori as anti-educational or malignant.

On the contrary, new research (Armstrong, 2000, 2005; Brown, 2004; Brundson et al., 2003; Tisdell & Thompson, 2005, 2006; Wright, 2006a) offers evidence that adults learn about issues from television, they construct their adult identities, in part, by identifying with particular characters, they relate their lived experiences to the experiences acted on the small screen, and they are exposed to a variety of ideologies from which they choose some elements to incorporate into their lives and actions. The possibilities for adult education research are vast.

Adults are using popular culture for self-directed learning projects. Wright (2006a; 2006b) found that the pleasures of watching prime-time TV drama can lead to

adult identity development and transformational learning. Her research indicates that self-directed learning from a favorite television character is not only meaningful, but is potentially transformational, life-changing and lifelong. Investigating the impact of “the first feminist on television,” Dr. Cathy Gale on the 1960s British cult TV classic, *The Avengers*, on her contemporaneous female viewing audience, Wright found that fans changed the direction of their lives by incorporating the character’s traits into their own identities. And they still relate to the character and enact the lessons learned from watching Cathy Gale, even after more than 40 years have passed.

Rogers (2002) found movies to be a great source of learning for African-American women. She argues that “we must acknowledge that movies play a vital role in the social construction of knowledge and learning about issues relating to difference, specifically those issues relating to race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity” (p. 327). She found that “movies serve not only as powerful socializing agents in society, but serve as vehicles where we can share and we can problem-solve” (p. 327). Her investigation into African-American women’s learning found that viewing films produced both intentional and unintentional learning. She challenges adult educators to “address the learning that is taking place in the front rows of movie theaters as well as in the classrooms” (p. 331). Rogers echoes Flannery and Hayes’s (2001) challenge to adult educators to ask themselves, “What can we learn about how one acquires knowledge and learning from . . . observations of popular culture?” (p. 37). More researchers should be asking that question.

Connecting to the Future

Public pedagogy is happening all around us. Giroux (2005) warns that “corporate power marks the space of a new kind of public pedagogy, one in which the production, dissemination, and the circulation of ideas emerge from the educational force of the larger culture” (p. 5-6). This public pedagogy has as its aim “to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain” (p. 6). He insists that a corporate-driven public pedagogy can “cancel out or devalue gender, class-specific and racial injustices of the existing social order by absorbing the democratic impulses and practices of civil society within narrow economic relations” (p. 6). To combat these hegemonic forces that promote a public pedagogy of capitalistic greed and that spread war, torture, poverty, commodification and injustice, educators need “a new understanding of how culture works as a form of public pedagogy” (p. 13). It is this new understanding that will arm critical educators with the weapons to initiate social activism and change.

Moreover, Amstutz (1999) posits that traditional adult learning theories are “ahistorical and acontextual” and should be revised to be more inclusive and culturally relevant. Teaching practices should be based on culturally relevant theories of learning, rather than simply relying on traditional methods of instruction. Media and cultural studies has evolved as a growing discipline in sociological and communications research, as well as in the realm of cultural studies, and some in that field have begun to turn their attention to the learning taking place in the public spaces of popular culture consumption. According to van Zoonen (1994, p. 35):

Film, television, (popular) literature etc. construct an imaginary world that builds on and appeals to individual and social fantasies. Mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in earlier centuries.

She further claims that, “The pleasures popular culture offers to women may be seen as a potential source of subversion. . . . , [or they] may be used to realign oneself with dominant identities” (p. 150). It is the potential for facilitating positive individual and social change through subversion, as well as the threat of increasing submission to dominant oppressive forces that is beginning to intrigue adult educators and focus increasing attention on popular culture as a locus of research inquiries. The technologies that deliver popular cultural products have developed at an almost alarming pace. Adult educators must be diligent and conduct culturally relevant research if we are to maintain our tradition of social activism and emancipatory teaching and learning.

Discussion

Popular culture and adult education are already co-habiting. Adult education theories of self-directed learning, informal learning, accidental learning, experiential learning, and women’s learning all acknowledge that learning happens in all aspects of adult lives. A few adult educators have, thus far, focused their match-making efforts on incorporating popular culture in their practice as a technique for reaching students in the classroom. But despite the insistence by some that most learning is happening in the public sphere, far fewer adult educators have taken the plunge, married their research

with their practice and studied popular culture as a site of informal, self-directed learning. Yet, adult educators have long recognized the use of fictional literature for its emancipatory potential when incorporated into an adult education curriculum. Greene (1990, p. 266) stresses:

An adult educator's concern (indeed, her or his *loving* concern) can still be to provoke an unease that leads to wonder and to inquiries, that awakens passion, that provokes desires to choose and to transform. . . . That is where literature is involved, is where emancipation might begin.

Wonder and inquiry are the results of a stimulated imagination. The products of popular culture help people imagine themselves as someone different and imagine a world that is less self-destructive. And according to Mezirow (2000, p. 20):

Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by 'trying on' another's point of view. The more reflective and open we are to the perspectives of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be.

So it is time to load the imaginary shotgun and create intimate connections between adult education and the pleasures of popular culture. The in-laws are tired of waiting, the wedding too long postponed, and the potential offspring too important to the discipline not to take action. Too few adult education studies have expanded on the concept of the imaginative potential in fiction to the broader cultural domain of the various forms of popular culture available to, and enjoyed by, adults in their daily lives. Popular culture does hold the *raw materials* for cultural resistance as scholars who hold Gramscian

views of the popular argue. To date, most adult educators have seen popular culture as a means of reaching students, but have yet to grasp the full impact of popular culture on adult learning and development. As K-12 scholars Giroux and Simon (1989b, p. 4) assert, “critical educators need to retheorize the importance of popular culture as a central category for both understanding and developing a theory and practice of critical pedagogy.” Adult education researchers must have the same goals.

Indeed, an increased role for media and cultural studies in adult education is essential if adult educators are to remain committed to activist, critical education and social change. Cultural studies began in adult education and it should return as a major component. As Kellner and Durham (2001, p. 1) note:

Forms of media culture provide role and gender models, fashion hints, life-style images, and icons of personality. The narratives of media culture offer patterns of proper and improper behavior, moral messages, and ideological conditioning, sugar-coating social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment. . . . With media and culture playing such important roles in contemporary life, it is obvious that we must come to understand our cultural environment if we want control over our lives.

Consider the time adults spend engaging with popular culture. Television is just one facet of pop culture adults engage with daily. Herr (2001) reports that according to the A. C. Nielsen Co., “the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day.” That is 28 hours per week or 2 months per year of 24-hour-a-day TV viewing. By age 65, Americans will have spent 9 full years of their lives watching television. Add the

time spent going to the movies, listening to music, surfing the World Wide Web, reading magazines and popular books, listening to talk radio, and shopping for the latest fashions, and the importance of researching learning via popular culture becomes clear. Accepting Knowles' (1970; 1980) assertion that adult learning is increasingly self-directed as people mature, adult educators must recognize that significant learning is taking place during all that time spent engaging with the products of popular culture. As the baby boomers age, they continue to look for meaning in their lives and explanations for personal turmoil as well as for world events, through the images in popular culture. Baby boomers, as well as the generations that follow, will continue to construct meaning from the pop images and messages they receive. They mark their lives with incidents from television: Kennedy's assassination, the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, Armstrong walking on the moon, Nixon's resignation, John Lennon's murder, the fall of the World Trade Center, the Challenger and Columbia explosions, George W. Bush on the deck of an aircraft carrier proclaiming "Mission Accomplished!" Individual life experiences, beliefs, morals, ethics, political choices and personal philosophies—our identities—are filtered through the images, commentary, and artful editing of the forces that operate through popular culture. Popular culture as a facilitator of self-directed learning can bring about learning that is far more powerful, lasting, and lifelong than learning in formal educational situations and other traditionally accepted areas for educational research.

There can be no doubt that media literacy, "must be a primary function of adult education. This new form of literacy helps adults become aware of the potential for

political manipulation inherent in the mass media, particularly broadcasting and the press” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 159). And as Lewis (1991) points out, “If we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or ‘texts’) *as they are understood by audiences*” (p. 47). That requires rethinking theories within the context of public pedagogy, as well as the development of research methodologies that draw from several disciplines such as media studies, cultural studies, communications, sociology, television and film studies, etc., in addition to critical theories and education.

Thus far, however, research on how adults learn from the pleasures of popular culture and how they incorporate that learning is scarce. Personal, public, informal learning—like the learning that takes place in the space between the television and the viewer, the magazine and the reader, the window dresser and the consumer—is “the most pervasive aspect of learning” (Roberson Jr. & Merriam, 2005, p. 270). As adult educators it is essential that we investigate that pervasive aspect of learning and focus a great deal of future research on that learning if we are to have a significant impact in this uncertain world. This dissertation is, I believe, the first of many such studies to come. I look forward to the discoveries that will follow.

*Goin’ to the chapel and we’re
Gonna get ma-a-a-rried.
--Dixie Cups*

*C'mon, c'mon and let me hear it,
Goin' to the chapel of love, love, love.
Shooby doo-whop, wa da*

*"that is the pits ending to a really terrific song!"
--as redone by Bette Midler*

POPULAR CULTURE, PUBLIC PEDAGOGY, AND PERSPECTIVE TRANSFORMATION: ADULT LEARNING IN LIVING ROOMS

*There had never been a woman like that on television before—in fact, there had never been a **feminist creature** before Cathy Gale.*

—Honor Blackman (D. Rogers, pp. 2-3)

[After watching Cathy Gale] Women were leaving their homes, their kitchens and their crèches in droves and going out and starting to throw men over their shoulders, which they've been doing ever since.

—Patrick Macnee (J. Porter, 1995)

Introduction and Background to the Problem

For many people, the idea of a *cult* has primarily negative connotations. But at times, phenomena that inspire a *cult* following, rather than forcing submission to *cultish* mind-numbing obedience, are prophetic harbingers of what is to come—of major social changes about to happen. Before I describe the British cult television classic, *The Avengers*, that is locus for the background for this study, I will first offer a definition for *cult TV*. Although difficult to define, according to Le Guern (2004), *cult* television programs, as opposed to merely popular ones,

will be those that display a form of rarity, with low accessibility—works rejected at the time by cultured spectators as outside the world of legitimate culture and by the “mass audience” for their disappointing lack of special effects, the weakness of their scripts, or the absence of the major stars expected in spectacular cinema—but which in some way oppose the uses of the most distinctive works of art operated by dominant groups. . . . This involves making

“low culture” sufficiently distinctive to put in place the elements of a structural opposition between certain categories of audience. (pp. 10-11)

Gwenllian-Jones and Pearson (2004), add elements taken from Umberto Eco’s analysis of cult films: a cult television show must be loved; it must have fans who intimately know the characters and can quote lines from the show; it must develop fans who make up quizzes, test trivia, and share expertise; it must have archetypal appeal; and it must have elements that can be broken, dislocated and unhinged “so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship to the whole” (p. ix). It is, then, the *fans* that make a television show into a “cult.” Many cultural studies and media scholars (Buxton, 1990; J. Chapman, 2000, 2002; Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004; Madden, 2000; T. Miller, 1997, 2004; O’Day, 2001; Soter, 2002), and even historians (Booker, 1970) have placed the British television series *The Avengers* within the genre of cult television programs.

According to Miller (T. Miller, 2004), *The Avengers* addresses issues of gender and empire and “what looks like escapist spy television is also a significant allegory that resonates with progressive political practice and viewing protocols” (p. 188). Beginning in 1961 with two male leads, Dr. David Keel, played by Ian Hendry, and John Steed, played by Patrick Macnee, *The Avengers* garnered an immediate fan base. But when, in the second season, one of the two male leads was replaced by a woman who was an “icon of the avant-garde” (O’Day, 2001, p. 224), Dr. Catherine Gale, played by Honor Blackman, the show began to take on the elements that led to its eventual *cult* status. Because several scripts had already been commissioned for the Ian Hendry-Patrick

Macnee team, and there was no money for new scripts, the producers had Honor Blackman read a part written for a man with a name change as the only revision (Macnee & Cameron, 1989; T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). As a result, the character developed with characteristics traditionally thought male. What emerged was an androgynous, but sexy, startlingly different female role.

According to O'Day (2001), introducing a woman in an action role “was perceived as revolutionary in itself, but to dress her in a ‘kinky’ leather action suit and ‘kinky’ leather boots” was “outrageous” and was “arguably the main reason why *The Avengers* developed into a cult sensation” (pp. 224-225). It seems that contemporaneous critics would agree. While complaining about the “serio-comic style” of most television “undercover men” in the 1962 fall season, Peter Black commented, in the *Daily Mail*, that they were all “undercover and out of mind, except for that Mrs. Gale” (1962, p. 4). She was quite different. Videotaped in live-action for a mere £4500 per episode (J. Chapman, 2002; T. Miller, 1997), the Cathy Gale *Avengers* changed forever the parameters of female television lead roles.

When Honor Blackman walked onto the set of Independent Television's (ITV) *The Avengers* in 1962 to replace Ian Hendry, she set into motion life changing self-directed learning experiences for many women viewers. She quickly become so popular, and her influence so feared by some in the government, that the show was temporarily “banned in England for electoral interference” (T. Miller, 1997, pp. 2-5) because she had appeared “in a commercial for the Liberal Party” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 5). Dr. Catherine Gale has been hailed as “the first feminist to come to a television serial; the first woman

to fight back,” (Buxton, 1990, p. 100; T. Miller, 1997, p. 7), and “the first feminist female lead” (Andrae, 1996, p. 115). And Chapman (2002) argues that the show’s producers positioned *both* the “actress and character at the vanguard of modern, liberated femininity” (p. 65) in their publicity and promotional materials. Dr. Cathy Gale’s arrival on the small screen “rocked the existing stereotype of subservient, domesticated TV women” (Richardson, 1996, p. 41). The Cathy Gale *Avengers*, which comprise the 1962-1964 seasons, “might be compared to Hollywood *film noir* in that [they] employed a style that is both technologically and aesthetically determined. . . . the perfect visual style for representing the suspense and paranoia of the ‘chaos world’ that the thriller inhabits” (J. Chapman, 2002, pp. 66-67). It was a world where no other woman had dared to enter. Women watching from their living rooms on Saturday nights took notice.

The purpose of this study was to explore the character of Catherine Gale, as a portal to contemporaneous women viewers’ adult learning. I was particularly interested in investigating the ways in which popular culture – and specifically television – can help facilitate the formation of critical and feminist identities among adult learner-viewers. The character of Dr. Cathy Gale is an example of the “opposition and resistance” that can occur when “producers, writers, and performers struggle to create programs which are neither purely palliative nor wholly uncritical of prevailing structures and ideologies” (Brookfield, 1986, p. 155). Despite the fact that second-wave feminism had not yet begun in England in 1962, the character of Cathy Gale was created with a black belt in judo, a doctorate in anthropology, an expertise with firearms, a

history of humanitarianism, a past as both a freedom-fighter and a big-game hunter, and a philosophy of humanism. She was also a superb photographer with a darkroom in her apartment. She often guest lectured at erudite societies on a variety of topics, from her photographic trip down the Amazon, to her anthropological research on remote African tribes. The producers, Sidney Newman and Leonard White, wanted her to appear a cross between two remarkable women, indeed—Margaret Mead, pioneering anthropologist, and Margaret Bourke-White, the famous photographer for *Life Magazine* who went on photo shoots to some of the most remote and embattled places in the world (J. Chapman, 2000; T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). But, they also wanted her to look like Grace Kelly.

Her name, Catherine Gale, developed from the concept that she was expected to hit the television audience like a ***gale force*** wind. A life history was created for the character that was far from the traditional, sad, melodramatic tale of a thirty-something, lonely widow. During Cathy's adventurous life, she had worked as a safari guide in Kenya after the murder of her husband by the Mau Mau (hence, her extensive gun collection covering her apartment walls), and had fought in the Cuban Revolution against Batista with Fidel Castro until he gained power and became a tyrant. After becoming disillusioned with Castro, she returned home to the place of her birth, London. And, surprisingly, she managed to do all this as a product of Britain's middle class (Macnee & Cameron, 1989; T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989). When Steed first seeks her out for information and help, he finds her working in a back room of the British Museum. Unlike her co-lead in the series, John Steed, who is a man of independent

means, she works to support herself. Also, unlike Steed, Cathy Gale cares about people, both individually and collectively.

British women watched Honor Blackman play not only a woman equal to a man but, in many ways, one that was superior (Soter, 2002). In the series, Mrs. Gale regularly challenges the thinking of the status quo—which bowler-hatted, old-school-tied John Steed, played by actor Patrick Macnee, represents. In black leather pants and boots, Cathy Gale is a sensation. Steed is tradition and Empire; Cathy is the vanguard of the new woman—democratic and egalitarian. She helps Steed when he appeals to her sense of justice and humanitarianism, but she regularly challenges his cavalier attitude towards human rights, biological warfare, nuclear arms, and individual liberty. In a 1962 mandate to the writers of the show, producer Leonard White cautioned them to always connect Cathy's involvement with Steed to her work as an anthropologist and/or photographer and insisted that they understand the character of Cathy:

Cathy must be correctly motivated She must have something special to contribute on the mission. So special that Steed needs her help. She must, above all, have the humanitarian and the moral attitude to the story. She wants to help those who are in peril or distress. She cares about them. This must of itself give rise to some conflict with STEED. His strictly professional and ruthless attitude will often enrage her [*underlining and capitals in the original*]. (D. Rogers, 1987, p. 15)

Unlike her successors, her interest in helping Steed was based solely on her personal ethics, activism, and convictions. In the pre-embryonic stages of the feminist

movement's second wave, Dr. Catherine Gale represented not what was, but what could be. And women were watching, listening and, as my findings indicate, learning.

Lester (1997) argues that “we begin to learn early and well from mass media” (p. 20). While the idea that we learn a great deal from popular culture has become a taken-for-granted notion among scholars in cultural studies, critical media studies, and curriculum studies, very little attention has been paid by adult educators to this vast realm of learning. This situation has just recently begun to change, however, as a handful of adult educators are beginning to investigate popular culture as an arena of informal learning. In this article and in recent publications, (Wright, 2006a, 2006b) I join other adult educators like Armstrong (2000; 2005) Brookfield (1986), Miller (N. Miller, 1999, 2000b), Tisdell and Thompson (2005; 2006) and Jarvis (1999; 2005) who view the mass media in general, and specific forms of mass media such as soap operas, prime-time television, and popular magazines as sites of education. These realms of informal adult education are often neglected by adult educators although they are widespread and gaining in popularity. Tisdell and Thompson (2005, p. 425), for instance, have stated that “discussion of the role of entertainment media in the education of adults has been absent.” They further note that this neglecting of popular culture's connection with adult learning is surprising, given adult educators' attention to the role of everyday experience in learning, and the focus within adult education on informal learning outside of the contexts of formal institutions. However, given that popular culture is always already educating us, Armstrong (2000) argues that adult educators must learn to “recognize and value a wide range of informal learning” (p. 16), including the learning centered on

popular culture products. Moreover, Miller (N. Miller, 2000b) asserts that “adult educators’ theory and practice can be enhanced by taking seriously the texts and pleasures of popular culture” (p. 1).

It has been argued by critical media and adult education scholars that the media both reproduce and challenge “structural power relations based on race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in their portrayals of characters” (Tisdell & Thompson, 2006, p. 397). Media images do not simply mirror “reality,” but “construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality [according to the powerful groups in society]. These definitions appear to be inevitable, real, and commonsensical” (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 2). Yet, “counter-hegemonic impulses of resistance and struggle are always possible” (Carter & Steiner, 2004, p. 3). And Armstrong (2000) asserts that, far from being a negative influence on adult learning, “television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues” (p. 2).

Television has been a major component of popular culture since the 1950s, and is often particularly powerful in the lives of women, because the reality of many women’s experience limits their opportunities for formal learning. It offers viewers a wealth of sensory information, fiction, facts, spin, myths, and examples in its news and entertainment programs. Television programs

provide one of the most popular forms of entertainment today . . . television shows amuse, shock, sadden, and excite us by turns. Television does more, however, than entertain. Television shows are cultural products, and as such

they reflect, reinforce, and challenge cultural ideals. As a pre-imminent forum for the expression of popular culture, television acts as a mirror and a model for society. In examining and coming to an understanding of the cultural messages and popular appeal of certain television shows, we come to understand something about the society that has created and sustained them. (J. E. Porter & McLaren, 2000, p. 1)

Clearly, television viewing should be viewed as a site for meaning-making and adult development. As Lewis (Justin Lewis, 1991) points out, “If we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or ‘texts’) *as they are understood by audiences*” (p. 47, italics in original).

Media and cultural studies theorists have long acknowledged that women viewers identify with film stars. They have identified at least three major areas of female film and television spectatorship: escapism, identification, and consumption (Brundson et al., 2003; Heide, 1995; Stacey, 1994). But a few cultural studies feminist scholars have started questioning whether women are affected more deeply by television and film viewing (Brown, 2004; Matterlart, 2003; van Zoonen, 1994). Cultural studies and television scholars have begun to reject the inevitability of passive reception to the messages addressed at them in popular culture. They question “the act of consumption itself, the process by which a subject receives and appropriates” (Matterlart, 2003, p. 31) messages in the media. Media scholars from the cultural studies disciplines are questioning “the monolithic nature of the ideological effect of domination” on women

viewers (Matterlart, 2003, p. 31). Instead, they are looking at how the consumer of media images and, in particular, television and film, receives those images “within a personal history, or the history of a group or class” (p. 31). This type of inquiry echoes precisely the goals often expressed by critical education researchers. Critical adult educators strive to explain how people make meaning of their interactions with their personal history, class, ethnicity, and the dominant forces that oppress them. Some adult educators are turning to the study of popular media and audience reception for critical explorations of learning.

I place this study within a small but growing body of literature within the field of adult education that focuses on popular culture as a site of informal adult learning. While educators in the field of curriculum studies have investigated multiple sites of popular culture for some time now (Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Cortes, 2004; Gee, 1999; H. Giroux, 1999; Giroux, 1994; Giroux & Simon, 1989b; Kruger & Shariff, 2001; Mahiri, 2000-2001; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006), this kind of work is just beginning within the field of adult education. Moreover, while a handful of adult educators are beginning to investigate mass media, in general, and specific forms of mass media such as soap operas, television, and popular magazines as forms of informal adult learning, much more work needs to be conducted in this arena (Tisdell & Thompson, 2006).

Historical Context: British Women in 1962

Brookfield (1986, p. 152) argues that the outcomes or effects of television “cannot be separated from their context and treated as isolated phenomena to which we

are given limited exposure. On the contrary, television's influence is all-pervasive. . . . it shapes the framework of our political discourse.” The modern British feminist movement, similar to the US movement, has its history and origins tied to the Rosie-the-Riveter phenomenon of World War II. While women's work outside the home was valued—even demanded—during the war, Britain's government sought ways to send women home to have children during the late 1940s and into the 1950s. England lost a significant portion of its population during the war and a move to “rebuild the family” was stressed by “professionals and politicians” who focused their attention “squarely on the issue of ‘adequate mothering’ as the surest means to securing future social stability” (Jane Lewis, 1992, p. 11). These concerns were prompted by the “pragmatic problems of the social and geographical dislocation of families as a result of the war” (p. 12). Some experts predicted that by the year 2000, “the population of England and Wales would be reduced to that of London” (p. 16). As one of the women in this study put it, “Well, I mean, it's incredible. With WWI that wiped out huge numbers of men, then WWII—I mean, if you look at my family tree, it's got huge arms missing or branches!” There was a very real fear that if women stayed in the workplace or rejected traditional roles and did not focus on having and rearing children, the UK could not retain its status as a world power.

These cultural fears are reflected in the characterizations of women on British television. According to Gauntlett (2002), “In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, only 20 to 35 percent of characters [on British television] were female. By the mid 1980s, there were more women in leading roles, but still there were twice as many men on screen” (p. 43).

He further found that, in 1975, “gender disparities varied” with nearly equal distribution in sitcoms where the “humour could still be traditional and sexist, despite this statistical parity—whereas in action-adventure shows, only 15 percent of the leading characters were women” (p. 43). Other research uncovered an even bleaker picture for women in British television who wanted to work behind the camera. In a study that compared the equity in these positions between 1950 and 1975, researchers found that the percentage of women had actually decreased from 18 percent to 15 percent (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis, 2002). Moreover, another study of British television roles for women found that, as recently the 1990s, as a result of the disparity mentioned above:

On television, ‘normal’ femininity has been depicted, if only by default, as overwhelmingly young, slim, white and (hetero)sexual/domestic. In contrast, ‘normal’ masculinity has been seen as less restricted and more often associated with power, action and control, even in the traditionally ‘feminine’ domain of the home. (Casey et al., 2002, p. 105).

In addition to the paucity of female roles, Gauntlett (2002) cites several studies conducted during the 1970s and 1980s that found consistent evidence that “marriage, parenthood and domesticity were shown on television to be more important for women than men,” and that “the women’s movement had been largely ignored by television with married housewives being the main female role shown” (p. 43). Equal opportunities for women in British television have yet to be realized, either in front or behind the camera.

As the 1960s dawned, the attitudes of the British government, the media, and others in power, as well as the bulk of the population, were fully entrenched in the idea that women were to focus their attention on home and family (Jane Lewis, 1992). In general, the British mood was less than optimistic. *Newsweek* summed up the pall that had fallen over the country along with the dense fog reported in the fall of 1963:

This has been the year of Britain's discontent, and the nation has been wallowing in an orgy of self-criticism as relentless as the one which swept the US after the launching of the first Sputnik in 1957. Last week the weekly *Spectator* speculated about "a failure of nerve at the centre." The *Times* worried about sagging prestige abroad. The *Guardian* found the root of Britain's troubles in "our veneration for out-of-date institutions," while the Labour Party bewailed "the corruption of standards of public life." . . . Everywhere there was disenchantment and self-denigration. As the *Economist* put it, "the British have become, suddenly, the most introspective people on earth." (Booker, 1970, p. 222)

Yet amid this general malaise "a new craze took over the nation's Saturday nights—a violent thriller series, *The Avengers*" (Booker, 1970, p. 222). It was in this context that Catherine Gale appeared in people's living rooms. Male television critics at the time called her: 1) a phallic woman, 2) a man/woman, 3) masculine woman and 4) vaguely lesbian, among other androgynous labels (Hart, 1964; T. Miller, 1997). Many women, however, identified with her. Rogers (1985, p. 6) published a "typical fan letter"

from 1963: “Dear Honor, when you threw that molesting oaf of a male over your shoulder last night, you were striking a blow for all us women.”

Honor Blackman as Catherine Gale was certainly a powerful image. Since the episodes were shot live on videotape with only one short commercial break, the audience was aware that when Blackman used judo to defend herself in fight scenes, she did not have a stunt double. The press considered it front page news when Blackman knocked out professional wrestler and part-time actor, Jackie Paolo, while filming the episode entitled, “Mandrake.” Newspaper headlines screamed Paolo’s seven and a half minute loss of consciousness for days (Madden, 2000; T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). Clad head-to-toe in black leather, Honor Blackman provided an image of an intelligent and educated woman who acted on her convictions, cared about justice and equality, and was able to beat a man in any arena. That feat, I would argue, is still unequaled on prime-time television.

According to Andrae (1996, p. 116) “*The Avengers* refunctioned the patriarchal discourse of the spy genre, transforming woman from an object of male desire into a subject who possessed ‘masculine’ power and independence.” Male audiences at the time, then, interpreted Cathy Gale in a far different way than female audiences. Clad in black leather pants, leather top, and boots, Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale challenged and inverted gender roles. In Foucauldian (1977; 1979) analysis, she became the dominatrix in order not to be dominated. In this way, she retained power and desexualized the character (while remaining a very beautiful woman).

Theoretical Framings and Related Literature

I place this study at the intersection of three related theoretical frameworks. First, I ground my perspective of the media in a Gramscian view of popular culture (Storey, 2006). Second, I draw upon the notion of “public pedagogy” as articulated by curriculum theorists such as Giroux (Giroux, 2000) and Ellsworth (2005). Finally, I am guided by critical feminist perspectives on the consumption and resistance of popular culture (Agger, 1992; Ang, 2003; Bordo, 1996; Brown, 2004; Brundson et al., 2003; Brunsdon, 2000, 2003; Carter & Steiner, 2004; Heide, 1995; Jhally, 1997; Matterlart, 2003; Stacey, 1994).

Gramsci and Popular Culture

First, I frame this research within a Gramscian view of popular culture. While there are many different ways to define popular culture and to approach the study of popular culture, including framing it as culture that is well liked by many people, “inferior culture” (Storey, 2006, p. 5), or what is left over after we have culled out ‘high culture,’ commercial culture produced for mass consumption, and folk culture emanating from “authentic” working-class people (Storey, 2006). I, following Storey (2006), embrace popular culture as a political site of struggle between dominant and subordinate social groups. This perspective on popular culture is grounded in a “Gramscian” cultural studies framework and views cultural commodities such as film, television shows, and magazines as the *raw materials* people use to *create* popular culture. Storey (2006) explains that people are active creators of popular culture, not simply passive recipients.

He argues that we are all “active participants in culture” – we select, reject, negotiate meanings from, attribute value to, resist, and at times are also manipulated by popular culture (Storey, 2006).

A Gramscian view of popular culture also focuses on the politics of popular culture, or how popular culture intersects with *power* (Bennett, 1998). Popular culture is thus viewed as a site of *contestation*, where individuals resist, negotiate, and accommodate power relations:

Both the culture we enjoy and the culture in which we live provide us with ideas of how things are and how they should be, frameworks through which to interpret reality and possibility. They help us account for the past, make sense of the present and dream of the future. Culture can be, and is, used as a means of social control. More effective than any army is a shared conception that the way things are is the way things should be. The powers-that-be don't remain in power by convincing us that they are the answer, but rather that there is no other solution. But culture can be, and is, used as a means of resistance, a place to formulate other solutions. In order to strive for change, you have first to imagine it, and culture is the repository of imagination. (Duncombe, 2002, p. 35)

Popular culture as a site of *contestation* enacts resistance through helping people imagine themselves as someone different. And according to Mezirow (2000), this imagination is necessary for adult learning and transformation:

Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another’s point of

view. The more reflective and open we are to the perspectives of others, the richer our imagination of alternative contexts for understanding will be. (p. 20)

That is, popular culture is always, at once, a site of hegemonic power as well as *political resistance*, because it helps individuals imagine a more just society.

Gramsci thus believed deeply in the possibility of the transformative power of popular culture and felt it could—and should—be used for social change. He saw the hegemonic structures of popular culture as an essential focus for action on a large scale. As (Mayo, 1999) points out:

Gramsci's focus on both aspects of the 'high' and 'low' cultural divide occurs as part of a constant search for a synthesis of potentially emancipatory elements found in both spheres. . . . Gramsci laments the deterioration of serial fiction in Italy and argues that the proletariat should develop this form of popular cultural production This literature must have been considered by Gramsci capable of providing working class members with a set of meanings relevant to the revolutionary project he had in mind. (p. 50)

I draw upon Gramsci's belief in the power of popular fiction to help transform Western Europe in the early part of the twentieth century, and urge critical adult educators to also recognize the power of popular culture—and specifically television, which operates as a visual form of popular fiction—to transform the lives of viewers-as-adult-learners. As Hartley (1994, p. 400) points out, television fans “are readers, subject to a series of encouragements and discouragements in their *ways of making meaning* from the sources of information and entertainment that pass their way.” [emphasis mine]

Public Pedagogy

Second, I draw upon theoretical work within critical curriculum studies that focuses on popular culture as a site of “public pedagogy” and informal learning (Giroux, 2000). “Public pedagogy” refers to the educational force of popular culture; popular culture teaches audiences and participants particular ways of acting and being, through the ways it represents people and issues and the kinds of discourses it creates and disseminates. Giroux (2000), for instance, argues that popular culture is where “identities are continually being transformed and power enacted” (p. 354). Giroux (1999) also posits that media culture “has become a substantial, if not primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen” (pp. 2-3). Bordo (1996), too, insists that media images are important spaces of pedagogy. She points out that “we live in a time in which mass imagery has an unprecedented power to instruct” (p. 119). Moreover, Ellsworth (2005) urges educators to pay more attention to informal sites of learning such as public art installations and museums—what she calls “anomalous places of learning”; and to focus on what she calls their “pedagogical hinges”—the aspects that make them so powerful as sites of learning and teaching (p. 5).

I draw upon these various notions of public pedagogy and, in this study, was particularly interested in how adults experience television as an aid to learning self/subject that leads to adult female or feminist identity formation. I also borrow from Ellsworth a way of thinking of public pedagogy an ongoing, active, creative *process*.

Grounded in notions of critical public pedagogy, I believe that adult educators should not be asking, “What knowledge is of most worth?” or “Whose knowledge should be taught?” or “Which practices will be most efficient in teaching these knowledges?” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 165). Instead, we should view popular culture in adult lives and ask, “How do we use what has already been thought as a provocation and call to invention?” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 165). This research sought to understand how critical adult educators can foster critical awareness, identity development, and social change using the informal learning taking place in our media culture.

Feminist Media Studies

Finally, because I was specifically interested in how women developed female/feminist consciousness through their interactions with the character of Cathy Gale, I draw upon feminist perspectives on consumption and resistance in popular culture. As van Zoonen (1994) has found in her feminist television research:

Audiences are no longer seen as positioned or interpellated by media texts, subjected to the vicious intentions of patriarchal power and ideology, but are considered to be active producers of meaning, interpreting and accommodating media texts to their own daily lives and culture. Television audiences may sometimes use television, even prime-time drama, as an instrument of positive change in certain circumstances and historical moments. (pp. 149-50)

She further claims that, “The pleasures popular culture offers to women may be seen as a potential source of subversion. . . , [or they] may be used to realign oneself with

dominant identities” (p. 150). It is the possibility that television can be an instrument of change that has led some feminists to conduct audience reception studies on television programs that are primarily consumed by women, like soap operas and prime-time melodramas (Brown, 2004; Brundson et al., 2003; Brunsdon, 2000). Those studies found that women commonly use their responses to the dilemmas and resolutions presented in these programs as a springboard for developing methods of dealing with a variety of concomitant situations in their own lives.

The power of television for instigating critical thinking and self-directed learning is what interests hooks (1990). She sees television as a means of reaching the oppressed and marginalized. She recalls her own learning and the meaning-making that occurred while watching popular television programs:

Watching television in the fifties and sixties, and listening to adult conversation, was one of the primary ways many young black folks learned about race politics. . . . The screen was not a place of escape. It was a place of confrontation and encounter. (p.3)

For hooks, television is a vehicle for learning and an instigator of activism and, therefore, can become an instrument of positive change.

Ang (2003) asserts that the television images women consume posit new possibilities for women viewers. Her research indicates that

female fictional characters . . . cannot be conceptualized as realistic images of women, but as textual constructions of *possible modes of femininity*. . . . They do

not function as role models but are symbolic realizations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify in fantasy. (p. 162)

She argues that “women are constantly confronted with the cultural task of finding out what it means to be a woman, of marking out boundaries between the feminine and the unfeminine” (p. 163). As I collected the stories of women who were influenced by Cathy Gale, I focused on how women integrated their fascination with a television character into their adult identity development. Unlike the women Ang studied, these women did position Cathy Gale as a role model. At that cultural/historical moment, they had few role models available to them that challenged cultural gender norms. Therefore, they studied the character and learned ways of acting and thinking that may not have occurred to them without her example.

Critical educators have long agreed that formal education is typically a form of cultural politics and privileged forms of knowledge construction that “support[s] a specific vision of past, present, and future” (McLaren, 2006, p. 168). I share feminist media scholars’, and Gramsci’s, conviction that the public pedagogy of popular culture is a site where resistance and revolution may be learned. I position this study within that emerging multifaceted framework.

Methodology

Because my purpose was to investigate Cathy Gale’s impact on women when they watched her over 40 years ago, I chose a qualitative design to help me uncover the text of women’s experiences who watched Cathy Gale in the 1960’s (Bogdan & Biklen,

2003; Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005; Merriam, 2001; Stokes, 2003). Unlike most television audience research conducted on female audiences, (Brown, 2004; Brunsdon et al., 2003; Brunsdon, 2000; Gauntlett, 2002), I was not researching the effects of current television viewing, but asking for life-stories of women who watched *The Avengers* over 40 years ago. I was interested in investigating a public pedagogy that facilitated long-term learning and identity development. This, of course, limited my study to women who were over 50 years of age, who lived in the UK in the early 1960s, and who regularly watched *The Avengers* when it initially aired. Thus, purposeful sampling was necessary (Merriam, 2001). In order to locate and recruit women who had been influenced by the character of Cathy Gale, I advertised on Internet fansites such as *The Avengers Forever* [<http://theavengers.tv/forever/dissertation.htm>] and *Gale Force: The Web Home for Avengerous Women* [http://www.geocities.com/galeforce_1962/index.html]. I sent and/or carried fliers to be distributed at conferences in the UK, distributed brochures in London, and asked British friends and acquaintances to tell others. In that way, I utilized snowball sampling to find women interested in participating.

Lury (1990), a sociologist whose research focuses on visual culture and developing a “visual sociology,” believes researchers of visual culture should explore “the ways in which imagistic description and images, both still and moving, can be understood not simply as illustrative, but also as concepts” (Hine, 1999). She argues that there is a need for a feminist methodology “that is sensitive to both social and cultural specificity” and to the relationship between the two (Lury, 1990, p. 43). Feminist

researchers like Ang, discussed in the previous section, have avoided interpreting representations in the media as social reality. Lury believes that is because those researchers have too often failed to link the cultural and the social. She argues that including textual analysis of the discourse of television programs and their historical context, with audience readings and appropriations, makes that crucial link. That was my goal with this research—to investigate how the *concept* that Cathy Gale represented, one of a strong, aggressive, independent feminist, was read, incorporated, and learned by her female audience.

Toward that aim, I collected realia² and related artifacts—scripts, fanzines, magazines with reviews and interviews—for comparative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2001). These documents and artifacts helped “ground my investigation in the context of the problem” (Merriam, 2001, p. 126). These included contemporaneous issues of magazines like the UK’s *TV Times* and numerous other magazines, spanning 45 years, that featured interviews with *Avengers* actors, writers, and producers. I also managed to find several issues of an *Avengers* Fanzine called *On Target* [later issues were titled *Stay Tuned*], edited and published during the 1980s by Dave Rogers, “the *Avengers* unofficial archivist” according to Brian Clemens, a screenwriter I interviewed. With a subscriber list of less than 600, these fanzines are rare finds. The entire collection was made possible by rigorously scouring Ebay for well over 28 months and digging through collectible book and pop culture memorabilia shops in

² Realia: “1. Objects used as teaching aids but not made for that purpose. 2. Real things, actual facts, esp. as distinct from theories about them” (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993). I use this term because it encompasses the wide range of items I uncovered and analyzed.

London. I also spent several long days at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London gathering what few audience statistics survived the various permutations of ITV since the 1960s.³ In addition, I received photographs from some of the women I interviewed. These artifacts, a personal interview with Honor Blackman herself, and interviews with two *Avengers* scriptwriters, Brian Clemens and Jon Manchip White, helped contextualize and inform my analysis of the women's stories. All together, these data made it possible for me to understand women's social and cultural role expectations in the UK in 1962-1964, and to situate that gender-culture's reaction to the unusual character of Cathy Gale.

Moreover, I viewed all 44 Cathy Gale episodes at least 20 times each for narrative analysis (Corner, 1999; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Macnamara, 2003; Stokes, 2003). That analysis is outside the scope of this paper, but it informed my reading of the women's stories and helped with interpretation by providing context. In addition, I viewed all 137.3 *surviving* original series episodes (1961-1968) in order to put the Cathy Gale block of episodes into the proper *Avengers* context.⁴ Finally, I watched all available episodes of *DangerMan*, *The Saint*, and *The Prisoner* as well as episodes of *Z-Cars*, sent to me by a colleague in the UK. Viewing these programs helped me locate *The Avengers* within the context of other

³ Most statistics kept were on how many viewers were watching *commercials* rather than the entertainment programs. Those commercials were not always connected to a particular program in their microfiche records. The BFI librarian I worked with confided that it was the only the commercial viewing that the studios were interested in tracking at that time. What I did find in BFI's basement room, were weighty tomes of bound *Television Mail* magazines. These were periodicals for people inside the television and advertising industries and included some listings of top shows and information on programs.

⁴ Only one act of three from "Hot Snow", the pilot and first ever episode with Ian Hendry and Patrick Macnee, the original two-man team, survives. All but two of the videotaped episodes from 1961 have either been lost or were destroyed due to deterioration. Many were probably taped over.

spy/crime dramas airing on British television at the time. This triangulation of multiple sources of data provided a “holistic understanding of the situation to [help me] construct plausible explanations” (Merriam, 2001, p. 204) about the women’s stories of learning.

In all, I interviewed 17 women about their lives before, during, and after watching the Cathy Gale *Avengers* in the 1960s. Fifteen interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted on the telephone. One interview was conducted in the US, and the others were conducted during two three-week visits to England in the summers of 2005-2006. All 17 viewer-learners were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality. All participants were aged 50 to 70, except for Honor Blackman and the two writers, all of whom are older. All are British and self-selected—they contacted me after reading or hearing about the project. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, then sent electronically to all participants for member checks (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 252; Merriam, 2001), with the exception of Ms. Blackman who requested a copy of the audio-tape rather than the transcription. This allowed the participants the opportunity to clarify or offer additional information and helped establish interpretive validity. Several email exchanges with participants ensued, allowing me to verify information that may have had culturally specific meanings. Since my first visit to the UK was to conduct this research, and I have lived my life in the US, I sometimes needed to ask about definitions and connotations of colloquialisms, despite my life-long interest in British literature and television.

Researcher Role

That admission, of course, introduces the issue of subjectivity. Subjectivity is a concern for all researchers. Peshkin (1988) argues that because “subjectivity operates during the entire research process,” researchers need to “systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17). Researchers must be self-reflexive during the research process and make every effort to “formulate self-corrective techniques that will check the credibility of our data and minimize the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence” (Lather, 1986). Researchers must be aware of their personal biases and assumptions. I began this study as an *Avengers* fan, with a critical, feminist, humanist life-philosophy. I enjoy watching *The Avengers*, as well as most British crime dramas and have an extensive collection of *PBS Mystery!* on DVD. I am intrigued by Honor Blackman’s portrayal of Cathy Gale. But my interest is as academic as it is traditional “fan” engagement with the program. I first discovered those episodes in 2002 and, at that point, I had developed an intense interest in critical and feminist theory, public pedagogy, and the concept of popular culture as a portal for adult learning. I believe that people learn more from the experiences of their everyday lives and pleasures than from the institutions of formal education. Therefore, I carefully designed the interview questions to be broad, encouraging the women to narrate their stories with as little interference or direction as possible. During the analysis process, I constantly questioned my initial interpretations of data. I considered, and sometimes recognized and incorporated, alternative interpretations. I did not know any of these women before they contacted me. Considering the time and financial resources required

to investigate a phenomenon that began over 40 years ago on another continent, I would have been foolish to enter into this project if I had no expectation that I would find that women experienced some sort of learning when they watched Cathy Gale in the early 1960s. However, I was pleasantly surprised when the data revealed the scope of that learning.

Philosophical Underpinnings

Although my framework is pedagogical, there were other philosophical perspectives that informed my analysis and I want to briefly describe those here. As a critical educator and humanist, I am concerned about the sexist, racist, classist, ageist, and homophobic messages that permeate most cultures. Like Giroux (Giroux, 1983), I believe that critical educational research has placed an “overemphasis on how structural determinants promote economic and cultural inequality, and an under-emphasis on how human agency accommodates, mediates, and resists the logic of capital and its dominating social practices” (p. 282). I am interested in the social practices that people engage with the most, such as viewing television and consuming other forms of popular culture, and the ways in which people utilize those activities for resistance and change. Therefore, to investigate gender issues and audience reception, I needed to conceptualize how the public pedagogy that occurs when viewer-learners engage with television within a particular view of gender identity development and cultural reproduction, domination, and subordination. In the following section, I will outline that view.

Discourses

In my analysis, I viewed the show's scripts and action, combined with the audience's reception of *The Avengers* as *Discourses*. The script—the words and actions on the screen—according to Gee (1999) is “little d” discourse, which he describes as “language-in-use,” or language that is used in everyday life situations to “enact activities and identities” (p. 7). But when “little d” discourse is integrated “with non-language ‘stuff’ [action, plot, cultural environment, historical context, and audience reception and interpretations] to enact specific identities and activities, then ‘big D’ Discourses are involved” (p. 9). The non-language “stuff” is what happens in the space between television programs and viewers' responses. Such Discourses are powerful agents in society and in individual lives. In *History of Sexuality Volume One*, Foucault (1979, p. 101) focuses on ways that power operates through Discourse, but makes it clear that neither is simply an instrument of power:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. . . . Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power: it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

The non-traditional discourse in the 1962-64, Cathy Gale *Avengers* made it possible for some women viewers to engage in a Discourse that thwarted commonly held ideas of women as weaker, less capable, less educated and more domesticated than men. The

gender roles of Cathy and Steed, her co-lead, were inverted. She was the more powerful character—intellectually, morally, and physically.

Foucault asserts that hegemonic Discourses are governed by rules invisible to speakers, and that they form a cultural unconscious that is “shaped by forces of constraint which determine what serves as truth Media, literary, and research conventions work in similar ways—acceptable values of production or methodology serve as unwritten rules” (Brown, 1990, p. 205). Breaking those normative linguistic rules is a way to resist dominant power structures. For Foucault, there are no relations of power without the possibility of resistance. I agree with Taylor (2004, p. 265) that “from a Foucauldian perspective, power is not opposed to, but is in fact a condition for, the possibility of freedom. Power, by virtue of its ‘agonistic’ nature, produces a kind of permanent provocation.” Honor Blackman’s portrayal of Catherine Gale was indeed provocative. As one woman I interviewed insisted, “***once Cathy Gale hit the screen, I mean, you know, the world was never the same again.***” (I use bold here, because she said that emphatically and slapped the table with each of the last four words.) Honor Blackman echoed that sentiment when she talked about women’s reactions to the character: “Once I acted Cathy, . . . women felt more capable in all sorts of directions.” She explained, “I think, you know, that Cathy—I know it’s just television—but she was liberated and women had never seen that before. It made them think about having careers and lives.” A “fully emancipated” (Madden, 2000), strong, single woman was a new thing for 1962 British television. The event created a Discourse with which women viewer-learners eagerly engaged.

Sex

In my analysis, I drew upon both Foucault's and Butler's ideas on identity development. According to Foucault (1979, p. 154),

The notion of sex made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.

For Foucault, the body is sexed through discourse and actions. Butler (J. Butler, 1990) would add that the discourse is "historically specific organizations of language" (p. 145). What made Cathy Gale's impact on viewers so intense was that she disrupted the historically specific cultural Discourse on sex and gender. She exposed the "fictitious unity," that is artificially constructed and by no means self-presenting. The fact that we cannot imagine a world without biological determination (what Kenneth Burke (1984) would call "trained incapacity" to imagine) indicates how effective the Discourses that legitimize compulsory heterosexuality can be. Our bodies, Foucault believes, are the result of discursive regimes, systems of normativity are effects of their implication in historical dynamics over which we have little control. Our bodies/sex/gender are the result of the "apparatus" that shape them. In *Power/Knowledge*, (1977), Foucault describes this apparatus as

a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures,

scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements . . . Between these elements, whether discursive or non-discursive, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function. . . (pp. 194-195)

Sexuality is the effect of apparatus, not pre-given forms upon which it acts. Our bodies, our pleasures, our genders are nothing but piecemeal constructions of history—of a differentiated and variegated set of cultural movements. Foucault, in these passages, is focusing on sex, rather than gender. But in my analysis of Cathy Gale, the artificialness of both is evident. When I called for women participants for this study, I received responses from 14 biologically-born women and three trans-women. For the purposes of this paper, all 17 interviews will be analyzed. I conducted a separate analysis of the trans-women's stories, however, which is the focus of another article. However, due to the nature of the respondents, I felt it was important for me to consider Foucault's views on the apparatus that construct both sex and gender in my reading of all the women's stories of gender identity development.

Gender

Gender, I believe, is a constructed product of our actions and our performances of self and, rather than a binary concept, gender lies in infinite forms on an infinite continuum. Butler (1990, p. 140) posits that, "The various acts of gender create the idea

of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all. . . . Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.” For Butler, all gender is “performative.” Gender is “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems” (1990, p. 139). Butler argues that despite these hegemonic forces, “the construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender” (p. 138). Butler believes that the “parody of gender” whether subtle or blatant, has subversive potential. She argues that “just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* natural, so these surfaces can become the site of dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (p. 146). This performative status of “natural” gender opens up the potential for political agency:

The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (p. 147)

In Butler’s view, the binaries of gender identity are maintained by repeated performance within the discursive framework of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality. The circumstances that led to Honor Blackman performing text written for a male actor positioned the character as a site of dissonant and denaturalized performance that presented immanent possibilities to her audience.

Synthesis

Gee, Foucault, and Butler's thoughts on Discourse, sex and gender melded to form the philosophical foundations for my engagement with the data in this study. As de Beauvoir (1973, p. 301) said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." The women in this study told stories of how they *became* women, influenced by Honor Blackman's denaturalized performance of their previously ingrained conceptions of the idea of "woman." Watching Cathy Gale provided materials on which they designed those identities. Without knowing Foucault and Butler's theories of discursive influences and cultural/historical apparatus that construct our sexed and gendered identities, they became examples—in varying degrees—of the resistance those theorists believe can develop if the apparatus is disrupted and challenged. Blackman's weekly performance as a fiercely humanitarian woman with a Ph.D., a black belt in judo, and character traits that were stereotypically considered to be male, disrupted and made ambiguous the perceived naturalness of a heterogeneous dichotomy of sex and gender. Cathy Gale's "stylized repetition of acts" was a performative gender construction that sent a disruptive gender message to some viewers in that era of severe compulsory heterosexuality and traditional gender norms. She was neither domestic, nor submissive, nor sexual in the way "sexy" women were portrayed in film and television. When she threw large men across the set during live-action taping, she acted gender in a way viewers had never seen from a female actor. The "big D" Discourses that developed between *The Avengers* and the audience blurred gender boundaries and resisted the hegemonic forces molding

early 1960s British society. Those Discourses were transforming for some viewer-learners.

Findings

The *avant-garde* character of Dr. Catherine Gale certainly raised gender awareness in the women who watched her. Stories of identity development ranged from a scientist who “knew [she] could be a scientist even when everyone told [her] ‘girls don’t do science,’” to a trans-woman [male to female transsexual] who said,

I have always known that there is a genuine Cathy Gale element within my persona that is available to call forth to help me to deal with difficult confrontational situations. In particular, it prevents me from defaulting into ‘male mode’ when I have to assert myself.

All 17 women I interviewed told stories of how watching the character in their late-teens to mid-20s helped them internalize characteristics that they saw in no other women at that time. Most related some variation of, “I learned that I could be what I wanted to be by watching Cathy Gale.” There were numerous indications of critical and life-altering learning resulting from watching Blackman’s riveting performance. First, women in this study learned that they could reject the traditional gender roles instilled by their culture, class, families, and religions. Second, they learned to incorporate Cathy Gale’s strengths into their personal development as women, as feminists, and as human beings. Finally, they learned the value of strong, intelligent, independent feminist role models. In the

remainder of this section, I will discuss in more detail these three critical moments of learning.

Rejecting Traditional Gender Roles

Steed:[enters Cathy's apartment] Good morning! How's Miss Whiz-Bang-Wallop this fine Trojan morning?—What's for breakfast?

Cathy:[barely glances at him] Cook it and see.

--The Avengers: "Man with Two Shadows"

*She does anything she wants, anytime she wants to, with anyone,
you know, she wants it all. . . . She's nobody's girl.
--Bonnie Raitt*

Housewife or Single Life?

As I briefly outlined above, through the 1950s and well into the 1960s Britain experienced a period of rebuilding, reorienting, repopulating, and rethinking their status in the world. As screenwriter Jon Manchip White explained it to me,

England had been in a terrible tailspin of descension. When I went to school you were expected to go out and govern the empire, you know? I saw myself as going out and becoming the governor of Bengal or the Punjab or something. . . . It's very hard to lose your imperial swagger, you know, and accustom yourself to becoming a not very important little off-shore island again.

A big part of that cultural anxiety was directed at improving the family structure, adhering to strict gender definitions, and producing numerous offspring (Jane Lewis, 1992). Another context to consider here is that birth control pills were not available in

Britain before 1961 and not widely used for some time after that.⁵ To marry and have children often meant having a lot of children. In this specific historical context, women watched Cathy Gale and saw a beautiful, educated, professional widow, who had no apparent interest in marriage. She dated occasionally and enjoyed a full social life, but her work, her academic research, and her determination to help Steed fight crime and injustice were paramount. The women in this study told me that made a huge and lasting impression on them.

Some chose not to marry, or to marry after establishing a career. But it was difficult for them to resist the societal norms laid out for them by their families, social structures and religions. Rosemary, for example, insists that she purposefully resisted marriage solely because of Cathy Gale. She confided,

I thought I'd have to find a husband, you know, before I was twenty. I just couldn't imagine any other thing! Couldn't just live with Mum and Dad, now could I? Didn't want to do that. But it was about that time, just as I started to panic, that I started watching *The Avengers*. I was fascinated with Cathy; she was alone. I decided that I could do that too. The hard part was telling that to mum and dad." She laughed, "They were mortified!"

I was struck by the fact that so many of these women chose not to marry and were glad—and that Cathy Gale was the reason. Helen chuckled, a little wickedly for a slightly plump, blonde-gray grandmotherly type, "Blokes are fun and I like having them

⁵ Birth control was first available in the US in 1960, but not legalized by all 50 states until 1965. It became legal in France in 1967 and was illegal until 1999 in Japan.. --
<http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/women/9906/02/japan.pill.02/>
 Asbell, Bernard. (1995). *The Pill*. New York: Random House

around—always have. But I wouldn't want to live with one! And I have Honor Blackman to thank. She was spot-on!" For the most part, if they mentioned that Cathy was a widow, they said it to dismiss it, claiming that "they had to make her a widow to make her respectable since she was on her own."

To be a "spinster aunt" or an "old maid" had been presented as a horror to these women while they were growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. Several mentioned that their parents would threaten them into being good by warning, "if you do [whatever] no one will want you and you'll be left a spinster!" But watching Cathy Gale perform a single woman with power and authority offered them an alternative view of an older unmarried woman—one that they liked and chose to incorporate into their identities.

Noah: I take it that you were a [big game] hunter, Mrs. Gale.

Cathy: Yes, for a while in Kenya. My husband farmed there. When he died, I supported myself taking safaris. --The Avengers "The White Elephant"

*You got nowhere to run, got her phazers on stun
With her toys like the boys, she is second to none.
--Melissa Etheridge*

Non-traditional Career Paths

Jobs and career choices for women in 1960s England were very limited. There were women who were teachers and nurses, but even those professions were not recommended to most of the women I interviewed. Two-thirds of them said they were only groomed to be married and have children. Other options were not presented until

Cathy Gale came into their living rooms on Saturday nights, saving the world from nuclear or biological weapons, saving men from certain death, and eagerly beating criminals with judo throws and any heavy object at hand. Only the top 20 percent of students were educated past a very basic education according to the two of the women I interviewed, and Dr. Gale seemed a “vision” to them. In the 1950s, only a very small percentage of women went to university. Jon Manchip White reminisced about his college days when I asked him to tell me about what the culture was like for women when Cathy Gale burst on the scene:

When I went to Cambridge in the 1950s there were only two girls’ colleges . . . and they were built on the outskirts so that you couldn’t get to them easily. The men’s colleges were only opened up to them sometime in the 1960s. I was studying Egyptology so, of course, my college was a male college totally. Women did teaching certificates, I think, [pause—thinking] not much else, I suppose. . . [trailed off]

It was difficult for him to even *imagine* women having other careers at that time. In that environment, Dr. Catherine Gale erupted in women’s living rooms flaunting a doctoral degree, working at the British Museum and lecturing to professional societies comprised almost exclusively of males. She had a history of world travel, and was brilliant and experienced enough that Steed, and by implication, the British government, regularly needed her help. Women took notice and, suddenly, the marriage and career options traditionally permitted for women and, heretofore, presented to them as their natural future, seemed boring.

According to Katie, at that time in Britain, women were thought to do quite well if you learned to type and do shorthand and get an office job. [She rolled her eyes and looked disdainful.] But you were never expected to then be [pause]—one day—the boss. I mean, if you were really, really good, and clever and you wanted a career, you'd be somebody's secretary.

But watching Cathy Gale made her think there could be other possibilities. She explained that she “got more tenacious,” as the television season got on, because her “admiration for the character made [her] feel quite brave and a bit cheeky.” This led to fights with her parents because they expected her to marry, have children and become a housewife. As an only child, she said, it was “life-or-death” to them that she “carry on the line.” But, she “wasn't ready for that life my mum had—Oh! We did fight over that. And when I told her that Cathy didn't need a husband, they wouldn't let me watch—I had to always be staying with a friend on Saturdays, so I could watch *The Avengers* after that.” Her rebellion only went so far, however, because she did become a “clerk—you know, books-keeper” instead of “going on the stage” which is what she really wanted to do. She laughed at the memory. Her parents considered it “next to [being] a prostitute if you wanted to go on stage.” Nevertheless, when Katie did marry eventually—in her late 30s—she and her husband got involved in “amateur theatre” and she currently operates an Internet business that sells theater memorabilia. Because she drew strength from Cathy Gale's tenacity in having what she termed an “unorthodox career,” she refused to give up her own dreams of working in the theatre. By the time she married her husband,

an engineer, she had “put away enough in the post office to start [her] business.”⁶ That business was a small retail theatre memorabilia shop near Drury Lane. She closed the physical shop a few years ago and moved her business to the Internet. “Now I can be home with my moggy [cat] and have my tea any time I like” she explained. For Katie, her life has been one of utter defiance of the expectations her family and social group had outlined for her. By today’s measures, she has perhaps led a fairly conventional life. But she did not have children, and she put her career first. Her family line, she said, “ends when I do.” She refused to succumb to the pressure to procreate. And she made her career on her own with no training or financial help. When she eventually married, she married a man who shared her passion for the theatre and they made the theatre a focus of their time together. She shuddered as she confided, “I don’t know what I’d have done if I hadn’t watched Cathy in those days. I really don’t. I know I’d probably have married just as mum wanted. . . . I’ve had a happy life and done just what I fancied!” She chose to perform her gender differently than the way her parents had inscribed on her body before Cathy Gale. She is still an avid Honor Blackman fan.

Many of the women told me that Cathy Gale made them take a critical look at their mothers’ lives, and they were not comfortable with what they saw. They looked to Cathy to provide alternative possibilities. Julie was an adolescent when Cathy Gale aired. She watched the gender norms exhibited by her stay-at-home mother and her father and thought, “When I grow up, I’m not going to be like that.” Instead, she dreamed of being a spy or a scientist. Cathy Gale was both: “It never occurred to me

⁶ Katie explained that the Post Office was more than the Royal Mail, it was also a place “one could establish ones’ savings.”

that, being a girl, I shouldn't want to be a spy when I grew up." Since Cathy Gale was "Dr." Gale, Julie resisted and rejected both teachers and peers who tried to keep her from "taking advanced science in school"; she was the **only** girl in those classes. She emulated Cathy and internalized Cathy's performance as a career woman. And, she said, she became almost obsessed with the show because all other women in movies and television "were pathetic women that fell over when the wind changed . . . that was the other role model, pathetic creatures that needed help. . . Women were not doing things. She [Gale] was the only one." Julie is currently a successful scientist at a major research university. She internalized Cathy's image as an educated career woman, "bullied" her "Mum into making me trousers—women didn't wear trousers," and stubbornly stayed in science.

Another quite successful viewer-learner who credits Honor Blackman with "teaching" her "new visions" of herself is Rosemary. A self-described "shopkeeper", Rosemary and her long-time partner own and operate a thriving three-story antiques shop in a trendy, artsy borough of London. "Actually," she said in a confessional tone, "dealing in antiques is the closest I could get to being an anthropologist without a university degree! I so wanted to be like her—to know so much about everything—to be so self-assured and confident." With her perfectly coiffed white-gray hair, sparkling blue eyes, and still impressive figure, Rosemary has managed to "be like" Blackman, at least in polished appearance. "I regularly go to see her on stage," she said of Blackman, "I've followed her career with great interest. You see, she helped me so much. She taught me

to think. I can't *imagine* what my life would have been like if she hadn't made me think differently."

Imagination is essential for learning to take place (J. Mezirow, et al., 2000). These women have had long careers that, they insist, would not have happened at all had they not watched Cathy Gale and recognized possibilities in her performance as a woman with exceptional abilities and an exciting career. Listening to their stories, I was struck by the apparent intensity of their admiration for the character. They see her as the rip in the fabric of a net-prison in which they were caught—a net-prison that had been woven for them at birth. Camille said, "I could see, but I couldn't *see* until I saw Cathy Gale and recognized myself in her." They escaped that prison by widening the rip and jumping out into the world. Cathy Gale opened worlds to them that they embraced with **relief**. It was in that sense of remembered relief, still strong so in these women after 40 years, that I recognized Foucault's (1979) assertion that our beliefs are imprinted on our bodies through the Discourses of the media, various institutions, religions family, and friends and that power is embedded in these Discourses. That power is articulated on the body through *discipline* (teaching, preaching, training, **punishing**, rewarding) and eventually, through *normalization* of certain practices or *signifying activities* which are expressed as things like gender and character/ethics. Through these processes, these women had been led down a life-path that is, in retrospect, abhorrent to them (marry young, have children, become housewives, perform subservient genders).

Cathy Gale represented a "performativity" of a gender identity that was completely inverted and dislocated from what they thought had been reality. It

disoriented them and, finally, that performativity provided a space in which to “locate strategies of subversive repetition” (J. Butler, 1990, p. 147) and created possibilities for breaking free. The data show that these women all believe that if the public pedagogy produced by *The Avengers* had not intervened, they would have followed cultural norms for women in the 1950s and taken a different path than the ones they constructed when those cultural norms were collapsed by Honor Blackman’s performance.

Incorporating Cathy Gale’s Strengths

Man: (putting a hand on Cathy’s waist) How would you like me to tuck you up?

Cathy: How would you like me to break your arm?

Man: No! No! That doesn’t appeal, no! (as she pushes him out the door.)

--The Avengers, “Don’t Look Behind You”

Girls will be boys and boys will be girls; it’s a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world.

--The Kinks

I’m not ready to make nice, I’m not ready to back down . . .

--Dixie Chicks

Physical Strength and Authoritative Presence

I was astounded when, over the course of 18 months, three trans-women [male-to-female transsexuals] answered my call for participants in this study. In this discussion of how the women rejected the traditional view of women as physically weak after their engagement with viewing Cathy Gale, it seems appropriate to begin with the ways these trans-women incorporated Cathy’s non-traditional example of a woman who could literally throw men across the room or, on occasion, make them cower with a piercing

glance, into their female identity construction. It is extremely significant that these trans-women chose to **retain** certain traditionally male characteristics when they transitioned, because “passing is critical to the process of transitioning” (Hill, 2000, p. 4).

Considering the depth of prejudice against transsexuals felt by some, it can even be dangerous for a transsexual to be exposed as a transsexual. But all three trans-women in this study told me that Cathy Gale gave them an example of a beautiful, graceful, feminine woman who, they felt, was a commanding presence. As one trans-woman, Chris, described what she liked about Cathy: “She could do things physically and in a commanding way that, before, only men could do. It made being trans less of a curate’s egg⁷, if you know what I mean—I could be like her!” She went on to add, “I **am** Cathy Gale and I **am** me and I **am** a woman; I’ve been able to be all that was inside me.”

Watching Cathy disrupt preconceived images of how a woman is expected to perform her gender freed these women to create their self/subject from the inside—from their core identity. Foucault and Butler’s concepts of gender/sex identity development are embodied in these trans-women and their stories. Astrid is one of the three MTF transsexuals who responded to my call for participants. She transitioned from male to female in the mid-1970s when she was in her 30s. Hill (2000, p. 4) discusses the fact that MTF transsexuals utilize numerous self-directed learning projects as “a rite of passage into female adulthood.” Astrid confirmed this assertion as she discussed how she used her memories of watching Cathy Gale a dozen years before her transition to inform her deliberate transformation into the woman she wanted to be. A petite woman, now in her

⁷ Curate’s egg is something that is good in parts and bad in parts, I was told.

mid-60s with a soft voice and mischievous smile, she related how her gender identity clinic, “set up an evening course . . . through the local education authority. . . . The rationale of the course was essentially to teach men how to look and act and sound like women.” Smiling shyly, she described the course and the way they were taught to dress and apply make-up. The instructor encouraged them to choose a woman they admired as a guide, an instructional tool, a type of gender *Cliff’s Notes*, for the development of their female personas. After learning how to choose a flattering style of clothing and make-up, she explained, “We now had to work out how I was going to interact, and it was at this point that I started looking round for models.”

Because she was “a local government officer” and “in charge of a large male labor force,” she needed a role model who was “professional, and competent, and intelligent, and active.” The “*only* person” who came to mind was Honor Blackman as Catherine Gale. She was most attracted to the fact that Cathy “can be commanding when she wishes to be commanding, but when she doesn’t wish to be commanding, she can dispose of it.” Astrid further explains, “When I’m at business, and especially when I’m having to fight for my point of view, against a male management team. . . I have to switch into Honor Blackman mode.” Against the advice of transsexual mentors who encouraged her to shift to a traditionally female occupation and exaggerate feminine characteristics in order to appear more feminine, Astrid chose to persist in the male-dominated career she had chosen as a man and to keep the assertiveness she had learned growing up as a biologically sexed male. She felt she needed to retain the aggressiveness, authority, and ability “to command and be obeyed” that 1950s and 60s

British culture considered male. Those were the same qualities that made Cathy Gale such a forceful, strong character.

A different aspect of Cathy's non-traditional characteristics appealed to China, a trans-woman who watched Cathy Gale in her late teens and transitioned when she was about 40. She is a very attractive blond, about 5'8", with a thin, athletic build. She laughs easily and often, and the twinkle never seems to leave her deep blue eyes. When I asked what made her interpret and incorporate Cathy Gale into her identity when she eventually transitioned, she threw up her hands, rolled her eyes a bit and said, "There still were no strong women about, even that recently—even now. . . . I had to rely on what I'd learned watching Cathy Gale." What she learned was that "a woman can be powerful." She explained, "You see, one of the issues was that I didn't want to be androgynous. I wanted to be a female." But she was worried because "women are such passive creatures" and, she told me, "funnily enough, when I was transitioning, one of my fears was that I'd turn into the wimpy little woman—the little washer." She liked, appreciated, and wanted to retain some aspects of herself that British culture gendered as male, but she wanted to be feminine: "I thought I might have to give up who I am and that's not the point, you know what I mean? I'm a transsexual because I needed to be the person I am inside—a woman." That was the inner turmoil and dilemma that led to her focus on her memories of the Cathy Gale *Avengers*. She explained, "Honor Blackman is like me. She's always been very fit and very powerful—I realized that power is this inner space and being, which is what she was showing us as Cathy Gale." China wanted to retain her physical power and still be feminine—a powerful feminine woman. She

laughed as she told me, “I’ve got a black belt in karate. It was a long time ago, but I’m still in good shape. I mean, if some man really tried to do me in, you know, I could do them in first! And it’s OK, because Cathy Gale could do it too! Talk about the *power* of popular media!” China is quite witty and charismatic. She recognized the performative nature of gender and is fascinated by the subject. That fascination has led her towards numerous self-directed, informal learning projects about gender issues, not just transsexual issues. She has read popular books on the subject and searches for fiction that “has characters like Honor Blackman—women to be feared.” Her recent favorite is “*She*” by Rider Haggard she told me. “You see, it’s just like Cathy Gale—she-who-must-be-obeyed! That’s me, too!” she said with a laugh.

Chris, the third trans-woman I interviewed, also found herself drawn to the character of Cathy Gale during her transition because she “didn’t have to have bollocks⁸, to have them, you know what I mean?” Chris is a thin woman, in her 60s, with brown hair and dark brooding eyes, and a quick flash of a smile. She had watched the *Avengers* in her 20s and transitioned in her 50s. She was in the armed services and trained as a nurse in the interim. She related how she purchased video-tapes of Cathy Gale episodes in order to teach herself “how to look like a woman, to be a woman, but also be the person I had learned to be as a man—tough. I wanted to still be able to tell Joe Bloggs⁹ to bugger-off. So I took those bits of Cathy Gale that were already inside.” Chris went on, “She’s a very female woman, Cathy is, but nobody messes with her if she looks them in the eye and has that certain way of standing.” She stood up and illustrated—hips

⁸ Balls, anatomically speaking

⁹ Joe Bloggs is used as Americans use John Doe

pushed forward, hand on hip, one eyebrow raised. “That’s what I wanted to be able to do, without getting clocked.”¹⁰ All three trans-women indicated that Cathy Gale was the only person, in the media or in their lives, that they felt comfortable modeling “bits” of themselves on when it came to the issue of **performing** strength, physical abilities, and attitude in confrontational situations.

The construction of a beautiful woman who performed culture-signified-male character traits motivated viewers to *imagine* other possibilities for their own bodies. Sawicki (1991, p. 95) argues that Foucault’s writings were “intended to serve as interventions in contemporary practices that govern the lives [and bodies] of oppressed groups such as homosexuals, mental patients and prisoners.” I believe that his ideas have a broader implication. If gender and even biological sex are constructions, which Foucault believed and my conversations with these trans-women indicate, then *human beings* comprises an oppressed group, and women are the more oppressed of that group. Cathy Gale, then, was an intervention for some who watched her.

Biologically-born-women who participated in the study were also attracted to the fact that Cathy Gale could physically defend herself. They were totally captivated by the strangeness, the unnaturalness, of the gender she performed. “She was unbelievable, but believable, know what I mean?” Helen explained. “I was mesmerized.” Just as the trans-women indicated, that attraction led to a deconstruction and then reconstruction of their definition the concept of *woman*. My conversation with Honor Blackman shed some light on how Cathy Gale evolved. Blackman holds a brown belt in judo, began riding a

¹⁰ Clocked means publicly outed—someone realizing she was a *trannie*.

motorbike at age 13, and has always been extremely athletic because her father “made [her] run everywhere” from the time she was small. Those were only a few of the elements in the actor’s background and education that led the writers and directors to create situations that allowed her to “use to full advantage” her abilities and accomplishments, she explained to me. She went on: “Men always said, ‘women can never be good at it [physical aggression and dominance]; they’re not sufficiently strong.’ Then if you find somebody [herself] who in fact can use the aggressor’s strength against him, then well, *the last bastion fell*.” The casting director began “hiring actors who were bigger and bigger every week because they thought it fun to watch me give them a stomach throw. I think I ended with somebody who was 18 stone or something!” The show’s creative team collapsed in resignation under that fallen bastion and learned to write Cathy’s actions and dialogue the way she had demanded they do initially, when they wanted to “write the little woman standing at the kitchen sink” against her protestations. Brian Clemens spoke to me about writing for Cathy’s character:

It was a happy accident, originally, it having been written for two men, and it kind of grew from there. Honor Blackman was quite sensational. To write for the empowered woman was fascinating. I think that Cathy Gale liberated me, too, in a funny sort of way, as a writer.

Part of the allure of Cathy Gale’s fighting persona was her action wardrobe. Because the costume designer needed to put her in something that would not rip easily, and that would offer some protection from the concrete studio floor when she was rolling around with an 18-stoner, she wore head-to-toe black leather with black leather boots for fight

scenes. The boots became so popular that Blackman and Macnee even recorded a popular song written for them called “Kinky Boots.” That leather and those boots became part of British fashion in the 1960s, and the appeal, the women told me, was that “wearing those boots meant you were tough and could take on anything.” Liz and Katie both talked of putting on leather boots when they need to feel strong as well as confident. They still wear boots in order to help them “take on the character” of Cathy Gale when they want to be confrontational and aggressive. Most of the respondents said that they continue to think actively about the character when they have to confront a variety of difficult situations. They “put on” her posture and defiant manner with their leather. Helen, Rosemary, and Katie said that, even now, they often think to themselves, “What would Cathy do?” when someone attempts to intimidate them. This question, for the participants, was distinctly connected Cathy’s strong, feminist, physical presence. One woman explained, “Cathy, you see, didn’t retreat. She was quite feminine, but she didn’t retreat when she knew she was right—and she was always right.” They literally ask themselves how Cathy Gale would perform her gender in a threatening or confrontational situation in order to “take on” those “fearless” actions and incorporate that performance into their identities as women.

Camille was fascinated by Cathy’s physical prowess and pointed out with a chuckle, “Blackman was an unusually strong, distinctive woman—hence a real subconscious wobbler for people to handle at the time.” Honor Blackman was indeed a strong, distinctive woman—with a mission. In 1963, Honor Blackman told *TV Times* (T.

Butler, p. 9) magazine that, after having accidentally knocked out professional wrestler and part time actor, Jackie Paolo, during a taping:

All the actors whom I have had to fight are telling the director that they want to know *exactly* what I'm going to do *before* I do it. I suppose they are getting rather apprehensive: let's face it; everyone is afraid of getting hurt. Poor lambs.

She felt terrible about the accident with Paolo, and tried to strike a balance between projecting realism onto the screen and into the living rooms of her audience, and not actually hurting people. She was a fierce opponent in fight scenes because, she told one interviewer (Madden, 2000) "I had to get it right, being the only woman who'd ever done it, I wasn't going to get it wrong, and it was tough going, fighting on the cement." That fierceness convinced women viewers that they did not have to be physically vulnerable. Two of the women I interviewed internalized that message by taking judo lessons in the 1960s and 1970s. While many girls today grow up taking self-defense classes of some sort, in 1962, women in hand-to-hand combat courses were extremely rare. But Rogers (1985, p. 5), in the fanzine, *On Target—The Avengers*, records the effect that Cathy Gale's on-screen martial arts exploits had on her audience:

Judo clubs across the nation knew not whether to condemn or to bow in thanks. *The Avengers*, scoffed some, was not presenting an accurate picture of their sport. On the credit side, however, membership rosters swelled dramatically as would-be Cathy Gales jostled with men looking either for her real life counterpart or a chance to defend themselves should they run into one.

Correspondents in newspapers chronicled comic scenes in British living rooms as

couples who couldn't face the formality of joining a club tried to re-enact *Avengers* scenes with the aid of teach-yourself-judo type publications. The only point of agreement between the two schools of thought was that Cathy Gale had, one way or another, given judo an awful lot of free publicity.

Obviously, this fanzine report was not an exaggeration. Among the women I interviewed for this study, one had earned a green belt in judo and another achieved the higher ranked brown belt. And China explained that the interest in martial arts that led to her earning a black belt in karate "came from watching Cathy do judo." These women talked about how empowering it was to learn to physically defend themselves. Although none were ever in a position to fight off a criminal as Cathy did, the knowledge that they could defend themselves empowered them. As one woman told me, "I was not afraid to get out there and do things like my girlfriends were."

Learning that they could become physically strong and embody power affected various arenas of their lives. When one participant was told not to pursue a particular career because she was not physically strong enough, she remembered thinking about Honor Blackman, as Cathy, throwing "12 stone oafs through the air" and said to herself, "I can do this." She did do it, and was able to acquire and maintain a job that required lifting heavy crates and boxes. "It was wonderful," she told me, "because it was like exercising all day. It's why I'm still so thin and healthy when my friends have gotten old!" Most said that, as young women, they had worked out in some capacity to gain physical strength. As Barbara, a tall, thin, retired university tutor put it, "I saw in Cathy

Gale the possibility of independence because she was so athletic. I wasn't frightened of being on my own. I think my parents had always wanted me a bit frightened."

Camille was aware of Blackman's statements to various reporters that, during the time she played Cathy, when she attended parties men tried to pick fights with her after they'd had a few drinks. The idea confirmed her own experiences with men after she had "become an empowered woman"—which were a bit less confrontational, but still reminiscent of Blackman's experiences. She laughed and put it this way:

No wonder men wanted to pick fights with her after a few drinks at parties. . . .

Not very different from my Jack Russell terrier, male, standing 14 inches at the shoulder who would often pick a fight with a much larger dog. [laughing] – [But] when I thought anything might be possible for myself, Cathy Gale on TV made more of an impression on me as a role model. . . . The woman she was—was completely off the scale!

"Off the scale" can be read: "not within the boundaries" of accepted behavior and the constraints of an oppressive gender system, normalized by the hegemonic forces—the apparatus, in Foucault's terms—that shaped British social/cultural Discourse. Just as Camille worded it—the transgressive behavior that was *off the scale* was Cathy Gale's performativity of "the woman she was." And it was when Camille had arrived at a place where she "thought anything might be possible" for her that Cathy became a role model. She had to mentally accept the possibility of a woman being "off the scale," before she could internalize the lessons she found in Cathy.

These women re-constructed themselves as women who were different from their vision of how women *should* be. They had a defiant tone as they related their stories. They rejected much of what their culture taught them about women because the character of Cathy Gale performed a different kind of woman—a woman with traditionally male traits and abilities—and the fierceness, confidence and aggression Camille described in her male terrier. Cathy constructed and performed a gender type that was unfamiliar, but attractive to women viewer-learners. They did not want to be “frightened” or “subservient.” As Liz put it, “I looked at Mum and thought—I don’t want to be that. I don’t want to spend my life looking after people who don’t appreciate it and always feeling . . . timid and afraid to have a thought of my own. I changed.” The women began *performing*, in Butler’s terms, a revised and reconstructed version of their gender.

Because Cathy Gale made them visualize alternative gender constructions and imagine themselves as someone different than what their socio-cultural training had instilled, these women enacted Foucault’s creation of self as a work of art by *performing* themselves differently. They all, to varying degrees, became the artist of their “self”—their identities as adult women. According to Foucault, “the self is not given to us, . . . there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (1984, p. 351). Doing so, however, involves resistance against internalized oppression created by the seeming intractability of normalized gender identity.

Steed: (looking at photographs Cathy is studying) Who're they?

Cathy: (holding up a photo of two emaciated Malaysian children) They're from the Chandigarh Province in Borneo. They're sending a medical expedition and they thought I might be able to help, as I was there last year.

Steed: (leering at her with a grin) Oh! I see.

Cathy: (angrily—disgusted at his callousness) Do you?

*My life is part of the global life,
I'd found myself becoming more immobile
When I'd think a little girl in the world
Can't do anything.
A distant nation my community,
And a street person my responsibility
If I have a care in the world,
I have a gift to bring
--Indigo Girls*

Moral and Ethical Strength

Connected to their efforts to draw lessons from the character's example to reject traditional gender roles, the women in this study spoke of drawing upon Cathy Gale's moral strength and personal ethic of caring about humanity. It was in this category that the women shifted back and forth between the character, Cathy Gale, and the actor, Honor Blackman, most often. The women were equally influenced by both the character and the actor in the arena of positive interaction with humanity and with the environment. In addition to "shifting into Honor Blackman mode" at work, Astrid talked of "painting a picture using the colors drawn from the palette of Cathy Gale" as she began living her life as a woman. She included in this palette the character's professionalism, demeanor and attire as well as her desire to "improve things generally."

While Cathy's physicality appealed because it ripped the veil of oppression and submissiveness from these women, they were equally influenced by the ethic of care that she embodied. As the trans-women's responses indicate, she was a complex mixture of physical threat and nurturing angel. It was her commitment to justice and equality and ethical worldview, embodied with the physical tigress defending the weak and punishing the wicked, that has had the most lingering and widespread effects on the viewer-learners I interviewed. Thirteen of the women told me that they do philanthropic and charity work because of both Cathy Gale and Honor Blackman. They admired Cathy as "one of the first women to do more than just talk about doing things to help people and change the bad things in the world." Liz put it like this:

My mum cared about the people close to her. But she also lived in a small world, if you know what I mean. We didn't have much—perhaps it was that—but she wasn't interested in people starving in Africa or what was happening in places that had once been part of the Empire. I always worried about that. Cathy Gale was the only woman on the telly that was interested as well. I was young and—maybe—idealistic, but I noticed that. She cared about babies in Africa before it was fashionable to do so.

All the participants have followed Honor Blackman's career, in varying degrees, and admire her commitment to activism. However, 13 interviewees specifically described how they have internalized her participation in politics and charities as part of their own identities. According to Rosemary,

Honor Blackman's husband, you know, died of cancer, and she's always been a big supporter and spokeswoman for cancer research and other charitable organizations. People love her for that. I want to do what I can to help people, as well. I think I got that from watching her. She was so much better, in that way, than Steed.

Rosemary donates time to several organizations including Oxfam and AIDS education organizations in various parts of the world.

Katie also expressed her determination to "do for people." She said, "Like Cathy, Kevin and I never had children. But like her, too, I try to help children's charities around the world and work to support them here at home." She made two trips, when she was "much younger, of course, to former colonies to do short-term work with UNICEF." She has also noticed Blackman's continued activism and takes a certain pride in it. "I'm quite proud of her. She's an asset, you know, to all of us [Britons]."

Several of the women showed a similar pride in the actor when they talked of her example as an active healthy individual. At 80, Blackman still works constantly. Her agent told me, "between her charity stuff and her plays and her television work, I can't imagine she has time for anything else!" The women I interviewed see the fact that she has been "out there, doing things, productive and vibrant" as one said, as inspirational to them as *what* she is doing. She still performs in musicals that are physical and rigorous. When I spoke to her in 2006, she was touring as Mrs. Higgins, in *My Fair Lady*. Two years before, at 78, she toured Europe as a one woman show called, *Honor Blackman's Wayward Women*. She continues to teach by example, as well as through two books she

has written for women on health, fitness, and self-defense. She is *performatively* enacting and embodying a very unconventional vision of an aging English grandmother. And while she claims that she is not purposely choosing her professional projects in order to inspire women and change lives, the playbill for *Wayward Women* reads: “A ‘sparkling entertainment,’ with songs, **which takes as its theme women who set about making changes in the way the world saw them and the way they saw the world.**” Her costume for the performance was an androgynous top-hat-and-tails tuxedo. I was not surprised to discover that Cathy Gale fans still look to Honor Blackman, the actor, for inspiration and life-lessons.

Honor Blackman has actively lived/taught political lessons, as well. Not only did she campaign for candidates in 1964 so effectively that the show was banned to avoid political interference because politicians worried her activities might unduly bias the audience/voter/learners, but more recently, she publicly rejected the monarchy and the very concept of an imperialism by refusing or accepting the CBE. Seven of the women mentioned the fact that Honor Blackman turned down Queen Elisabeth II when she offered to bestow upon her the title of *Commander of the British Empire* (CBE) in 2003. Few Britons turn down such honors from the monarchy. Blackman told one reporter that since she believed England should be a republic, “it would be gross hypocrisy to accept that” (Galton, 2004, p. 11) .

Although some of the women admitted that they would have accepted the CBE had it been offered to them, they admired her decision and talked about her turning it down with mischievous grins. She is an example to them of a principled woman. Helen,

looking embarrassed, cast her eyes on the floor and said, “Well, I understood why, of course, she turned it down, but I don’t think I could have. [She looked up and laughed heartily.] I mean, you know, to have a cuppa with the Queen!” Jon Manchip White, on the other hand, was shocked that she would refuse the CBE. Shaking his head in disbelief he cried, “No! Not many people would! She did that? To become a member of the British Empire is quite an honor; no, not many people would.” Yet, Honor Blackman, a long time political activist and outspoken critic of systems of inequality, would not consider accepting it. Liz, China, and Rosemary were delighted that she refused the title. China emphatically stated, “I wasn’t surprised. It’s that edge—that fearless edge—she’s not afraid of what people think. Not even the queen!” Both the character and the actor have that “fearless edge” that makes them role models and instigators of change and transformation.

Foucault’s concern with ethics dominated his thinking in later essays. According to Fillion (2005, p. 60) Foucault believed:

Ethical life is not merely a question of acknowledging what can be ‘maturely’ considered as justified constraints. Ethical life can also mean testing those constraints and limits and transforming ‘the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible crossing-over’ or moving-beyond. (p.60)

This “crossing-over” to be “off the scale,” as Camille put it in her quote in the previous section, in order to break free from constraints and limits is a pedagogical moment of

empowering learning for Cathy Gale/Honor Blackman fans. Cathy Gale initiated, within the women who participated in this study, a true transformational learning process

Learning to Value Role Models

Cathy: Joey, I'd like you to meet John Steed, (To Steed) this is Joey Frazier. He's one of the leading lads at our local youth club. (Joey shakes Steeds hand; Steed winces.) Joey is my star judo pupil.

*Steed: (nursing his hand from Joey's grip) Yeah, I'm not surprised.
--The Avengers, "Killer Whale"*

*Sisters are doin' it for themselves, standin' on their own two feet,
and ringin' on their own bell.
--Annie Lenox*

Cathy Gale and Honor Blackman are both role models for the women in this study in both their past and present forms. The women-viewer-learners I spoke with found having that example invaluable to imagining their lives and actively designing themselves based on the lives they wanted to lead. They also learned how important role models are for women. Cathy Gale was the first and only independent feminist personae on British television in the early 1960s. Women told stories of their intense appreciation for her as their first role model and related stories of searching for similar models, or being determined to be role models for others, throughout their lives. For each participant in this study, their attraction to Cathy Gale resulted from the fact that the image she projected, the gender identity she performed, was unlike anything they had imagined possible. Mezirow's (2000) assertion that imagination is central to the possibility of transformational learning is evidenced in the results of this study. Yet most

people rarely conceive of the kind of dramatic gender/sex/role disruption that Cathy performed for her audience, without first discovering the *concept* in some form of textual, media, or cultural representation. As the women in this study repeated often, and historical/cultural context supports, women in 1950s British culture who challenged and resisted gender norms were very rare indeed. Cathy's impact on viewers' lives was intensified, therefore, by the "happy accident," as Brian Clemens called Cathy's creation as a woman speaking culturally male dialogue. It fired their imaginations and resulted in perspective transformation. It also cemented in their psyche the importance of role models for resistance and revision.

Barbara, who also achieved a Ph.D. and credited Cathy's example for that accomplishment, actively sought mentors among the few women instructors at her university. She explained, "I was at university when the show aired. I found women [among the faculty] who also liked her; I suppose we were drawn to the character for similar reasons—they became role models" in her academic life. She stated, "Now, of course, I feel I'm fully evolved and don't need role models necessarily, but throughout life, I looked for women who would challenge what I'd imagined for myself—like Cathy Gale did."

Katie spoke of finding feminist role models who, like Cathy Gale, were fierce in their commitment to social justice as well as to interesting careers. "Unfortunately," she said, "I can only find them in books." She has found role models in contemporary mystery fiction, like Kay Scarpetta in the novels of Patricia Cornwell and Temperance Brennan in Kathy Reichs' mystery series. For her, these women are part of Cathy Gale's

legacy. “Before *The Avengers*, women detectives were not very interesting in books. Miss Marple just isn’t someone you want to *be*, you see. You like her; she’s familiar, but you don’t want to be her.” Several other women mentioned women protagonists in fiction as role models. China, as I mentioned earlier, adores the power of *SHE—who-must-not-be-named* and plans to use that book to instruct other women about “powerful, frightful, femininity” in the empowerment workshops she and her partner conduct through their human resources training consulting firm.

Astrid listed many historical figures she admires and reads about. She uses the knowledge about these women to strengthen and empower her self-conception and gender identity as a strong, empowered, feminine woman. A history buff, she told me, she enjoys reading about women “Like Princess Budica, the queen of the Iceni who led her army into battle against the Romans. And her chariot had knives on the axles and would create havoc.” She particularly enjoys Princess Budica because she feels that her struggles are mirrored in today’s global economy, the persistence in so many cultures of acts of violence against women, and her lived experiences: “The Romans arrived on the scene and, um, behaved like a big American corporation, you know, making people offers they can’t refuse.” As she told me about Budica, she got increasingly indignant as she talked, “Oh, the Romans were welcomed in many communities because they did bring organization with them—and prosperity—**provided you did what you’re told.**” As she continued to talk about Budica, she drew more and more parallels with Western capitalism, saying that the Romans raped and murdered her two daughters, and threw Budica out “like rubbish . . . like the red Indians in the nineteenth century.” She ended

Budica's story with, "So, if you want a female role model, read about her! She is a Cathy Gale of another era." She also reads about "Good Queen Bess who "didn't lead the army from the front . . . but she did know how armies operated." But while Astrid searches for other role models in books and popular culture, none were as "complete" as Cathy. She found some "bits" she could "take" from Jane Austin heroines, Princess Budica, and a French newscaster from the 1970s, yet admitted that she still "calls forth" the character of Cathy Gale most often. Julie also found inspiration from historical figures. After realizing how much Cathy had meant to her, she "started reading books about women . . . the first woman doctor and things like that." She searches history for people like Cathy Gale who "had just done it. They wanted to [have a particular career] and they just did it."

Some found role models in feminist writers. Germaine Greer and Kate Millett were mentioned, as well as Nancy Chodorow and Michele Barrett. Surprisingly, only four of the women found role models among their families and the social-cultural milieu of their youth. Most of the others all searched for role models in books, popular culture, or in women outside their known spaces. Their comments are reflected in Helen's assertion that, "In my day [when she was younger and in the process of deciding how to shape her self/life], there just weren't women in my village to admire. No Cathy's there. There were the housewives, the blue stockings, and the black stockings and garters!" she laughed, "I did NOT want to fit into any of **those** categories!" So her role models, like Astrid's and Julie's, were primarily historical figures "like Elizabeth I. The problem, of course, is that by our standards, these were not attractive women! I suppose that is one

reason I continued to think about Honor Blackman and Cathy Gale.” None seems to have found the package, the whole woman, as appealing anywhere else. It is understandable. As recently as June, 2006, a poll conducted by the UK’s Bottlegreen Drinks company designated Blackman as the 6th most beautiful woman in Britain (“Contactmusic.com NEWS,” 2006). At 80 years of age, she topped Kate Moss, Sienna Miller, Elizabeth Hurley and Jane Seymour in the top 10 in the survey for *Britain’s Greatest Beauty*.

Liz was one of the four who spoke of finding contemporary mentors who “remind [her] of Dr. Catherine Gale, the anthropologist who lectured at erudite societies and always knew everything.” Like Barbara, she, too, found feminist mentors at school and in her career, rather than her family or the social milieu of her up-bringing.

Two thirds of the women pointed out that, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was “quite difficult” to find empowering, feminist role models.” That is one of the reasons Cathy Gale made such an impact. They clung to her representation for many years after she left *The Avengers*. Camille put it this way, “We moved to a small industrial town where further education for women was generally felt to be a bit of a waste—so the world of possibilities shrank to something very dull.” She concentrated on internalizing Cathy’s example and looking for other women who were “like Cathy” for inspiration.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

By Honor Blackman’s second season as Cathy Gale, 12,000,000 people in the UK were watching *The Avengers* each week. The show was consistently in the weekly

Television Audience Measurement [TAM] top twenty most watched television shows ("TAM Top Twenty," 1963). My conversations with women who were among those 12,000,000 viewers revealed how they constructed knowledge from popular culture that led to life-altering perspective transformation. The women I interviewed are the women they are, in part, because they watched Cathy Gale as adolescents or young adults. This study was a deeper investigation of viewer interaction with popular television than Stuart Hall's (1996) schema of dominant (hegemonic) reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional (counter-hegemonic) reading; this study delved into the transformational learning that can be the result of television viewing, and the possibilities television holds for the creation of critical or feminist identities. It helped me understand how this particular character affected the lives of individual women, as they understand it now and related it to me more than *forty years* after viewing the program. Dr. Catherine Gale encouraged women viewers to explore their options—and to create new ones. The learners in this study integrated her example into their daily lives. This study focused on expanding and deepening our understanding of audience receptions to include how women learn from television and incorporate that learning into their identities, transforming their lives. To date, there has been little critical exploration of transformational learning through popular television viewing. Yet the results of this study clearly indicate that self-directed (Knowles, 1980) and transformational learning (J. Mezirow, 1978; 1991) can happen any time that preconceived, indoctrinated, or hegemonic ideas, such as gender norms and traditional roles, are challenged in popular

culture. Those counter-hegemonic forces provide a public pedagogy that is enthusiastically received by viewers who want to find alternative ways of being.

Foucault (1977; 1979; 1984) encourages us to be critically reflexive about how the materiality of our bodies comes to signify specific, culturally pervasive ideas about the body, sex, and gender. Butler (1986, p. 514) claims Foucault's tactic "is not to transcend power relations, but to multiply their various configurations, so that the juridical model of power as oppression and regulation is no longer hegemonic." The gender identity Cathy Gale performed was disseminated through television into women's personal spaces and was taken up, incorporated, re-visioned, re-constructed and re-performed within the bodies of the women in this study. The binary configurations of male and female were deconstructed and various configurations emerged.

Agger insists that "hegemonic culture attempts to define culture from the top down in terms of the system's own needs for legitimation, productivism, and consumerism" (p. 10). Cultural studies, he posits, "emphasizes that culture is conflict over meaning—over how to assign value to human existence, expression, experience" (p. 10). Cultural studies research stresses the "conflictual nature of values and meanings in capitalist, sexist, and racist societies" (p. 10). These conflicts "are powerful initiators of, as well as symptoms of, social change." Furthermore, Agger stresses, "the potentials within culture for conflicts to lead to aesthetic and political resistance and thus overall social change" (p. 10) are what drives research into popular culture. Those potentials are what drove this research, and the results of this study support Agger's claims.

The appearance, before second-wave feminism, of a female television character that resisted cultural gender norms and defied gender expectations made those conflicts more intense and disorienting for some viewers. *The Avengers* is a pop culture phenomenon (and a current Cult TV favorite) that incited in women-viewer-learners a conflict of meaning about women's roles and gender "naturalness" when the Cathy Gale episodes hit the airwaves in 1962. It was a moment in time and circumstance that illustrates the concept of and potentiality for resistance to culturally defined roles theorized by Arnot (1984), Foucault (Foucault, 1979), Butler (1990), Gramsci (Forgacs & Smith, 1985), and Agger (1992) among others. Some viewers experienced significant life-changing learning from this moment of public pedagogy.

This study demonstrates how adult learners may use television, even prime-time drama created to entertain, as an instrument of pedagogy. The women in this study were not just watching Honor Blackman in *The Avengers*; they were also learning that they could construct new and different identities and changed bodies. For the women and the biologically-born men with core female gender identities who participated in this study, Cathy Gale disrupted the dominant culture's Discourse of sex and gender roles. Those who view popular media as *only* "monolithic transmitters of a dominant ideology uncritically assimilated by an audience of passive dupes," fail to "allow for elements of resistance and opposition within the media and consider media producers and workers to be robotic automatons working at the behest of ruling elites" (Brookfield, 1986, p. 154). The producers, writers, directors and actors of the Cathy Gale *Avengers* episodes were obviously not automatons.

However, opportunities for investigating positive feminist role models on television are limited. Honor Blackman was replaced in 1965 by a female lead that was purposefully “softened,” “feminized” and given “*man appeal*” (written down as “M-Appeal” by a secretary taking notes on the meeting where the male creative team made that decision; hence, the successor’s name, *Emma Peel*). The producers felt that the character of Catherine Gale “intimidated” the male audience and, therefore, wanted a more feminine and compliant female lead (T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). They replaced a *gale force* with *man appeal*. After the change to a more feminine, adoring female co-lead, Miller (1997) claims that *The Avengers* changed genres. The show no longer belonged to the crime-spy genre of its contemporary, *Z-Cars* and *DangerMan* (J. Chapman, 2000; T. Miller, 2004). It quickly evolved into a fantasy-action series, with emphasis on humor, glamour, and fancy cars, with plots that were far-fetched and even quite bizarre at times. Instead of realism, it became “a parody of the straight thriller, creating its own quaintly unrealistic world of amiable eccentrics and diabolical criminal masterminds” (J. Chapman, 2000, p. 43). It was and is still a fan favorite and Emma Peel, played by Diana Rigg, was still a formidable female lead—just not a believable one. The realism disappeared along with the challenging, critical humanitarian—replaced by an adventure-seeking fashion-plate.

The role of media and cultural studies in adult education is certain to increase in the future. As Durham and Kellner note in their introduction to *Media and Cultural Studies* (2001):

Forms of media culture provide role and gender models, fashion hints, life-style images, and icons of personality. The narratives of media culture offer patterns of proper and improper behavior, moral messages, and ideological conditioning, sugar-coating social and political ideas with pleasurable and seductive forms of popular entertainment. . . . With media and culture playing such important roles in contemporary life, it is obvious that we must come to understand our cultural environment if we want control over our lives. (p. 1)

Giroux and Simon (1989b) “demonstrate how the formation of identities takes place through attachments and investments which are as much a question of affect and pleasure as they are of ideology and rationality” (p. 4). Women certainly identified with the pleasure they derived from watching Honor Blackman as Catherine Gale. When I spoke to Blackman she stated, “It was lovely the applause one got from women—I mean the amount of fan mail there was that said, ‘Good on you’ ‘Keep it up’ and ‘Well done’, you know.” Women responded to the character and incorporated her traits into their identities. Accepting Knowles’ (1970; 1980) assertion that adult learning becomes increasingly self-directed as people mature, adult educators must investigate further the learning that is taking place during time spent in front of television sets. This study suggest that learning may sometimes be more powerful, lasting, and lifelong than that facilitated by formal educational situations and other traditionally accepted areas for educational research.

Beder (1991) contends that “the desired outcome of transformative research is emancipatory social change—change in which the subordinated are empowered to take

control of their lives and to change the conditions which have caused their oppression” (p. 4). After more than forty years, the participants in this study still credit the character of Cathy Gale with their own resistance to oppression and changed lives. As critical adult educators, we must stay informed about popular culture, engage in it, and reflect on it, in order to recognize the opportunity to use it to affect student learning. This study contributes to the small but growing body of research on adult learning and popular culture, and it is my hope that the results will encourage other adult educators to recognize that transformational learning is not necessarily something that happens in a formal educational setting. Learning can happen any time that preconceived ideas, such as gender norms and traditional roles, are challenged in popular culture.

LEARNING EMPOWERMENT, RESISTANCE AND FEMALE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FROM POPULAR TELEVISION: TRANS-WOMEN TELL STORIES OF TRANS-FORMATION

You see, as a male, I looked like a music teacher—I thought as a woman, I'd look like a female music teacher. But I didn't; I looked like a woman army officer . . . , and it was at this point that I started looking around for models.

--Astrid, research participant

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.

--Simone de Beauvoir

Background and Happenstance

Hill (2000) asserts that male to female (MTF) transsexuals utilize numerous self-directed learning projects as “rite[s] of passage into female adulthood” (p. 4). He “positions direct action as a pedagogical tool, locates transsexuality as a site of learning in adulthood and situates it as a place for knowledge and meaning-making” (p. 5). He also posits transsexuality as an “under-investigated” site of social activism (p. 5). This paper is part of a larger study exploring the impact one unusually strong feminist television character had on women viewers’ identity development (Wright, 2006a). During that research project, three trans-women (MTF transsexuals) answered the call for participants wanting to share their stories. It became evident that the television character influenced not only biologically-born women to become empowered feminists, but she also impacted biologically-born males who later became trans-women.

Many scholars cite the publication of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 as the beginning of second-wave feminism in the West. But at least a year before Freidan's work landed on women's bookshelves, Britons had their own *féministe mystérieuse* appearing weekly on their television sets in the character of Dr. Catherine Gale in the 1962-64 spy drama, *The Avengers*. The first few scripts had already been written for two male leads when Honor Blackman replaced one of them. Due to budget constraints, she played the part with a name change as the only revision (T. Miller, 1997; Soter, 2002) and the first Cathy Gale episode aired September 29, 1962. When the writers finally began writing new scripts for a female lead, Blackman was unhappy with the result. They "set about writing the sort of dialogue that the little woman at home or by the kitchen sink or whatever would say" Blackman complained in a recent interview (Soter, 2002, p. 75). The character of Cathy Gale had by then been established with attributes that the male writers—and early 1960s British culture—considered masculine. She was tough, strong-willed, aggressive, educated, intelligent, decisive, confident, world-wise, challenging, persistent, and self-sufficient. With the support of her co-star, Patrick Macnee, and the producer, Leonard White, she told the scriptwriters to do as before and "write it for a man. When I deliver it, nobody will think it's male dialogue." (T. Miller, 1997; D. Rogers, 1989; Soter, 2002). They continued to write what they considered to be male dialogue—and she created a pop culture phenomenon.

The Avengers was a very low budget Independent Television (ITV) British spy drama that was shot live on videotape after only 10 days of rehearsal. It certainly did not fit any aspect of Brunsdon's (1990) definition of "quality" in British television

programs, which she describes as a combination of a literary source, well-known actors, high production values (and corresponding outlay of money) and “a certain image of England and Englishness” (p. 86). Yet, this low-budget crime thriller had a significant impact on many viewers. Honor Blackman, as Cathy Gale, deliberately inverted the gender norms of early 1960s cultural discourse by reading and acting a part written for a man. In this study, I was particularly interested in exploring the ways in which television can help facilitate the formation of a critical gender identity among women learner-viewers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How and what did women learn from watching *The Avengers*?
2. How did they incorporate that learning into their lives and into their identities?
3. How did they interpret and accommodate the feminist example of Cathy Gale?

Biologically-sexed males, whose core gender identity was female, were among those drawn to this popular, gender-bending TV character and who constructed self-directed learning and meaning-making based on the character.

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

For most Westerners, television is a significant part of both cultural and social discourses. The average U.S. citizen watches 4 hours of TV each day, the equivalent of 2 months of 24-hour-a-day viewing each year. By age 65, the average American has spent a full 9 years watching the boob tube (Herr, 2001). While our culture, and many educators, posit the activity of television viewing as anti-educational and common metaphors have developed that reflect that concept—including boob-tube, idiot-box,

etc.—I believe TV watching is far from being a passive or neutral activity. Following scholars in critical curriculum studies, I position television watching as a site where learning takes place, meanings are negotiated, and identities are shaped. In order to explore television in its myriad functions, I have drawn from several complementary theoretical frameworks, including Mezirow's (1991; 2000) transformational learning theory, Gee's (1999) conceptions of discourse/Discourse, Ellsworth's (2005) framing of public pedagogy, Foucault's (1980) explication of Herculine Barbin's journals, and Butler's (1990) theories of gender as performatively produced.

Important in the process of perspective transformation is the notion of *imagination*—of imagining a new way to be, and a new way to act in the world. According to Mezirow (2000, p. 20), “Imagination is central to understanding the unknown; it is the way we examine alternative interpretations of our experience by ‘trying on’ another’s point of view.” Television allows viewers to imagine themselves as someone different. The three self-directed learning projects undertaken by the women discussed in this section were literally *transformational*. Each of the three trans-women I interviewed for this project described the stages of their transformation in terms almost identical to Mezirow's (1991) ten phases of transformational learning—from the disorienting dilemma of realizing they were transgender, to their reintegration into society and the workplace based on their “new perspectives” as women (p. 168-169).

Of particular interest in this study are the ways in which television helps learners conceptualize and enact particular gender identities and helps structure social discourses on gender. Agger (1992, p. 122), for instance, asserts that gender texts within popular

media, “teach both women and men how to be gendered; they are normatively constitutional and thus must be interrogated as scripts of obedience and submission.” And Tisdell and Thompson (2005), in a research study exploring how adult educators use entertainment media in their classrooms and how popular culture affects attitudes about various group identities, point out that “the entertainment media teach us something about ourselves as we map new meanings onto our own experience based on what we see. . .” (p. 425). Not surprisingly, their investigation revealed that gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) television viewers preferred programs with GLB characters (p. 429). Thus, the messages we absorb from the programs we watch become part of our subjective selves. Sexual discourses operate at individual, cultural, and political levels through popular images of gender roles. Unfortunately, the hegemonic powers that create those discourses have little tolerance for ambiguity now and they had even less 45 years ago.

Indeed, for television audiences in 1962, there was little diversity in the portrayal of dichotomous, heterosexual gender roles. Hence, Honor Blackman’s strident construction of Cathy Gale, a stunningly beautiful woman who could best male opponents both mentally and physically, had a distinct attraction for viewers whose gender identities were not reflected in the rigidly delineated gender roles modeled by most television characters of the era. Jarvis (2005) emphasizes that “popular culture can push ideas to their limits, escape the literal, and give concrete and dramatic form to issues” (p. 12). In the early 1960s, the character of Cathy Gale gave concrete and dramatic form to the issue of gender diversity.

The scripts and action, combined with the audience's reception of *The Avengers* may be viewed as *Discourses*. The script—the words and actions on the screen—according to Gee (1999) is “little d” discourse, which he describes as “language-in-use,” or language that is used in everyday life situations to “enact activities and identities” (p. 7). But when “little d” discourse is integrated “with non-language ‘stuff’ [action, plot, cultural environment] to enact specific identities and activities, then ‘big D’ Discourses are involved” (Gee, 1999, p. 9). The non-language “stuff” is what happens in the space between television programs and viewers' responses. Foucault (1979, p. 101) asserts, “Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” According to Foucault, sexuality is created through Discourses (medical, psychiatric, social, legal, religious, cultural, etc.) that label both people and acts. For Foucault (1979), religious discourse, for example, positions sexual acts within the context of marriage and situates some sexual acts as sin. Religion, therefore, defines biological functions. It is the language, the individual faith, and the cultural confines of particular religions that have that power. This is an example of Gee's “big D” Discourse working in people's lives. Each Discourse (political, cultural, etc.) that people immerse themselves in is a pedagogical interaction. These Discourses can include, as Gee indicates, engagement with entertainment technologies like video games and television.

Ellsworth (2005) argues that the act of watching film and television constitutes a pedagogical situation. Viewers engage with characters and plots in the same way that they engage with the works of art and architecture that attract them. Watching film and

television becomes an act of public pedagogy initiated by the viewer/learner. Further, this act of pedagogy involves the viewer both physically and emotionally:

The visual experience of watching a film . . . has a material nature that involves biological and molecular events taking place in the body of the viewer and in the physical and imagined space between the viewer and the film. Affect and sensation are *material* and part of that engagement. (p. 4)

Ellsworth (2005) believes viewer responses to the experience of intense engagement with a character or story is a “pedagogical anomaly” that is “difficult to see as *pedagogy* only when we view it from the ‘center’ of the dominant educational discourses and practices” (p. 5). But when we reject the view that “knowledge is a thing already made and learning as an experience already known,” we can see the space between viewer and screen as “the experience of a learning self in the making and the term ‘pedagogy’ can then be applied” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 5). This public pedagogy takes place in the body of the viewer and the space between viewer and television. Knowledge develops within Gee’s “big D” Discourse of “stuff” between fans and characters.

In the 1962-64 episodes of *The Avengers*, traditional gender roles were inverted by the characters of Cathy Gale and John Steed. She was the more powerful character. Because there had not previously been images of tough, intelligent, accomplished women who exhibited traditionally male traits—physical strength, success, decisiveness, aggressiveness, self-confidence, acumen, and worldliness, to name a few—non-heterosexual, heterosexual, and transgender viewers alike recognized the power of the

Discourse between Cathy Gale and her audience. This Discourse thwarted the dominant political, cultural, and binary concept of gender.

Herculine's Eden--A Backdrop

To illuminate other aspects of this research I also draw upon Foucault's introduction to the English translation of the journals of the 19th century French hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin (1980). Foucault's analysis of the memoir of the French hermaphrodite illustrates the horrific effect of dominant, normative gender categories. As a woman, Herculine was, like some male-generated descriptions of Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale, too masculine and too strong. But when Herculine was a man, she was too feminine. Herculine's culture could not accept her as a lesbian and that led to the sexual reassignment (as a man) that ultimately resulted in her suicide. She literally died because she could not fit into the Discourse of contemporary gender norms. Some find fault with Foucault's interpretation of Herculine's being in a "happy limbo of a non-identity" when she was accepted as a girl and was experiencing desires for other girls, as a bit too simplistic. It mistakenly assigns lesbianism to a place of "non-identity" (J. Butler, 1990). While I agree with that critique, his other assertions have validity. In the convent girls' school, Herculine was allowed to be herself, according to Foucault (1980), because her non-identity was "paradoxically protected by the life of those closed, narrow, and intimate societies where one has the strange happiness, which is at the same time obligatory and forbidden, of being acquainted with only one sex" (p. xiii). That ignorance of the outside world—and males—allowed for Herculine's happiness. Being

an intersex adolescent in that cloistered environment without the language, the indoctrination, the discourse that assigned labels to gender, allowed Herculine the freedom to be content. She was not, I concur with Butler (1990, p. 101), a non-identity in the context of the relationships she enjoyed in the convent school. That implies that heterosexuality somehow leads to developing a gender identity. Herculine had no culturally accepted name/label for her identity, but she certainly had one. Herculine's gender identity had simply no definition within the hegemonic discourses of the culture. Rather, Herculine's story is a powerful example of how discourse (the dialogue written for a man, but acted by a woman, for example) shapes our identity, and how language and the non-language stuff of Discourse (interactions with the products of our popular culture) defines us, at least to the extent that we internalize it.

But such Discourses can also offer opportunities for resistance. That resistance can come in a variety of forms, but the most interesting one to consider, I believe, comes from Butler (1990, p. 33):

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. . . . To expose the contingent acts that create the appearance of a naturalistic necessity . . . is a task that now takes on the added burden of showing how the very notion of subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies.

Butler (1990) describes Foucault's reading of Herculine's world as an "ontology of accidental attributes that exposes the postulation of identity as a culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy, a regulatory fiction" (p. 24). She accepts that gender identity is, indeed, a regulatory fiction, but she insists that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (p. 24). Butler provides possibilities for rethinking gender categories "outside the metaphysics of substance" (p. 25). For Butler, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be results" (p. 25). In other words, when it comes to gender, you *are* what you *do*.

Trans-people resist internalizing the biological, medical, religious, social and cultural Discourses that attempt to gender them. Herculine, without the freedom to gender herself, was forced to resist by committing suicide. It could be argued that by not allowing her culture to force a male gender identity upon her, Herculine's final Discourse with her culture was to free herself from it. Without the "pedagogy of presence" and "pedagogy of praxis" discourses that Hill (2000, p. 4) found to be widespread in the MTF transsexual community, Herculine had no Discourse with which to situate herself and, therefore, resisted in the only way she could. Today, trans-women create a Discourse of resistance and advocate for social change (Hill, 2000). Cultural and social Discourses allow us little freedom to construct our own gender identity unless we resist by deconstructing existing Discourses and by creating new ones (J. Butler, 1990;

Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1988a). The trans-women who participated in this study created a Discourse of resistance in their interactions with Cathy Gale. Her portrayal of a woman with male personality characteristics allowed them the freedom to construct their female identities while maintaining desirable aspects of their male personas.

Methodology

Because my goal was to explore how the character of Cathy Gale influenced contemporaneous women viewers and aided their adult gender identity development, a qualitative research design, with its focus on subjectivity and interpretation, best suited this research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Harry et al., 2005; Merriam, 2001; Stokes, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain that qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of a variety of empirical data “that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (pp. 3-4). Qualitative researchers also deploy a wide range of “interconnected interpretive practices,” that they hope will allow them to understand the issue they are studying (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) thus employ the metaphor of a “*bricoleur*,” or quilt-maker to describe the practice of “deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand” (p. 4). I position myself as both a methodological *bricoleur*, employing a variety of qualitative techniques to analyze the data, and an interpretive *bricoleur*, who understands that my personal biography, gender, social class, and cultural background shape my approach to the study and my interpretation of the data. The result is a reflexive *quilt* of interconnected representations of the trans-women’s interactions with

Cathy Gale, with myself, and with their constructed female identities, bordered by a lattice-work woven from my fascination with gender identity development as self-creation, as art, and as performance.

Unlike most television audience research conducted on female audiences, (Brown, 2004; Brundson et al., 2003; Brunsdon, 2000; Gauntlett, 2002), I was not researching the effects of current television viewing, but seeking life-stories of women who watched *The Avengers* over 40 years ago. I was interested in investigating a public pedagogy that facilitated long-term learning and identity development. This, of course, limited my study to women who were over 50 years of age and who lived in the UK in the early 1960s. Thus, purposeful sampling was necessary (Merriam, 2001). In order to locate and recruit women who had been influenced by the character of Cathy Gale, I advertised on Internet fansites devoted to *The Avengers*, such as *The Avengers Forever* (<http://theavengers.tv/forever/dissertation.htm>), at conferences in the UK, with widely distributed brochures, and by word-of-mouth. These brochures solicited the participation of women who watched Cathy Gale when *The Avengers* originally aired in the 1960s and who felt the character had made an impression on them. My search for participants snowballed and I was contacted by a number of biologically-born women and, serendipitously, by three trans-women who underwent surgery in the 1970s and 1980s.

Lury (1990), a sociologist whose research focuses on visual culture and developing a visual sociology, explores “the ways in which imagistic description and images, both still and moving, can be understood not simply as illustrative, but also as concepts” (Hine, 1999). She argues that there is a need for a feminist methodology “that

is sensitive to both social and cultural specificity” and to the relationship between the two (Lury, 1990, p. 43). As feminist researchers have avoided interpreting representations in the media as social reality, Lury believes researchers have too often failed to link the cultural and the social. She argues that including textual analysis of the discourse of television programs and their historical context, with audience readings and appropriations, makes that crucial link. Thus, this was the goal of my research—to investigate how the *concept* that Cathy Gale represented—a strong, aggressive, independent feminist—was “read” and learned by her female audience.

With that in mind, I spent over two years collecting dozens of documents and artifacts—scripts, fanzines, magazines with reviews and interviews—for comparative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2001). These documents and artifacts helped “ground my investigation in the context of the problem” (Merriam, 2001, p. 126). These included contemporaneous issues of magazines like the UK’s *TV Times* and numerous other magazines spanning 45 years that featured interviews with *Avengers* actors, writers, and producers. I also managed to find several issues of an *Avengers* Fanzine, *On Target* (later issues were titled *Stay Tuned*), edited and published during the 1980s by Dave Rogers, the *Avengers* unofficial archivist. With a subscriber list of less than 600, these are rare finds. The entire collection was made possible primarily by rigorously scouring Ebay for well over 28 months. I also spent several long days at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London gathering what few audience statistics

survived the various permutations of ITV since the 1960s.¹¹ In addition, I received photographs from some of the women I interviewed. These artifacts, a personal interview with Honor Blackman herself, and interviews with two scriptwriters, helped contextualize and inform my analysis of the women's stories. All together, these data made it possible for me to understand women's social and cultural roles in the UK in 1962-1964, and to situate the socio-cultural reaction to the unusual character of Cathy Gale.

I also viewed all 44 Cathy Gale episodes at least 20 times each for narrative-textual analysis (Corner, 1999; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Liebllich et al., 1998; Macnamara, 2003; Stokes, 2003). That analysis informed my reading of the women's stories and helped with interpretation by providing context. In addition, I viewed all 137.3 *surviving* original series episodes (1961-1968) in order to put the Cathy Gale block of episodes into the proper *Avengers* context.¹² Finally, I watched all available episodes of *DangerMan*, *The Saint*, and *The Prisoner* as well as episodes of *Z-Cars*, sent to me by a colleague in the UK. Viewing these programs helped me locate *The Avengers* within the context of other spy/crime dramas airing on British television at the time.

In all, I interviewed 17 women about their lives before, during, and after watching the Cathy Gale *Avengers* in the 1960s. Fifteen interviews were conducted in

¹¹ Most statistics kept were on how many viewers were watching *commercials* rather than the entertainment programs. Those commercials were not always connected to a particular program in their microfiche records. The BFI librarian I worked with confided that it was the only the commercial viewing that the studios were interested in tracking at that time. What I did find in BFI's basement room, were weighty tomes of bound *Television Mail* magazines. These periodicals were created for and primarily used by people inside the television and advertising industries and included some listings of top shows and information on programs.

¹² Only one act of three from "Hot Snow", the pilot and first ever episode with Ian Hendry and Patrick Macnee, the original two-man team, survives. All but two of the videotaped episodes from 1961 have either been lost or were destroyed due to deterioration. Many were probably taped over.

person and two were conducted on the telephone. One interview was conducted in the US, and the others were conducted during two three-week visits to England during the summers of 2005 and 2006. All 17 viewer-learners were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality.

This paper focuses specifically on the interviews of the three trans-women who participated. All three were in their late 50s to mid-60s, professional, and eager to talk about their experiences. I interviewed all of them face-to-face in or near their homes in various shires in England. I will provide more details about those participants later in this paper. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, then sent electronically to all participants for member checks (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 252; Merriam, 2001), with the exception of Ms. Blackman who requested a copy of the audio-tape rather than the transcription. This allowed participants the opportunity to clarify or offer additional information and helped establish interpretive validity. Two of the three trans-women used *track changes* to add several comments to the transcript, as well as to clarify misinterpretations/misspellings due to cultural differences. I incorporated those changes into the transcripts. An example of cultural clarification occurred when one of the trans-women told me that, if she had gone into the Air Force when she was still biologically male, she would have “felt like a cat at Cruft’s.” I transcribed that as “crusts” and put a question mark after it, because I was unsure of the transcription. The participant changed the spelling, but I still could not have understood the significance if she had not explained in her comments that “Cruft’s is Britain’s biggest and most prestigious dog show.” Since I have lived in the US all my life, that was something I did

not know, yet it was important to the meaning of her statement. While I would have searched the Internet and found that particular reference, it was better to have the explanation in her words. I also had several email exchanges with participants while I analyzed data. During these exchanges I asked for clarification or for input on my interpretation of their stories. These ongoing dialogues were helpful in ensuring that my understandings of participants' stories were accurate as far as what they intended to convey.

I then analyzed interview transcripts using constant comparative techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Merriam, 2001). While this data analysis method is typically associated with Glaser and Straus's (1967) grounded theory methodology, where it is used to develop substantive theory, it is also "compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research" (Merriam, 1998, p. 159), and is thus a useful data analysis tool for many qualitative researchers. Since the interviews took place over a period of 18 months, and considering that I did not expect to be contacted by three trans-women, this method of coding and repeatedly engaging with the transcripts, documents, and videos was useful. This method also helped me manage the huge volume of data that resulted from the project, without relying on qualitative software.

Findings

“Men Always Said, ‘Women Can Never Be Good At [Physical Fighting]; They’re Not Sufficiently Strong.’” ***--Honor Blackman, personal interview, July 2006***

To better situate the trans-women’s stories, I will offer some context from some *Avengers* creators and program artifacts. In my interview with Honor Blackman in July, 2006, I asked for anecdotes about meeting viewers whom she might have influenced. Her immediate response was, “I used to have lesbian fans.” She elaborated, “I used to have lesbians write to me. I had one woman who truly loved me, and it became quite frightening because she lived at the flats very close to us and she’d drop notes under the door.” Some fans became obsessed: “I had one—one lesbian fan, we found her in our basement by the boiler!” The Cathy Gale character, according to Blackman, seemed to have an intense attraction for lesbians. It is perhaps not surprising that, given the June Cleaver types that saturated 1962-1964 television, the confident, lovely, leather-clad Cathy Gale appealed to a broad spectrum of viewers. As scriptwriter Brian Clemens, who wrote 45 *Avengers* episodes, including five Cathy Gale episodes, explained it, before Cathy Gale “it was very much the 50s, actually. Women usually played housewives or secretaries. They weren’t shown to be—contributing.” He continued, “Cathy Gale took on a man’s role. That’s the difference.”

Perhaps it was that difference in the character of Cathy Gale that was so appealing to some viewers, yet threatening to viewers who clung to the cultural myth of the “naturalness” of rigid, heterosexual gender stereotypes. Blackman recalled, “Quite a few men, when they’d had a few drinks, would try and call me out for a fight . . . and then

they liked to try to mock me, because I really unnerved them.” Her husband at the time, Maurice Kaufmann, confided to a reporter in 1963 that men

seem to resent the way Cathy Gale can take care of herself. It takes away their male ego. They identify Honor with Cathy Gale so they take it out on her. And she always rises to the bait and gets aggressive back. . . . With us, it’s the husband stopping the wife having a fight—not the other way around. (Weaver, 1963, p. 14)

Jon Manchip White, the scriptwriter for the episode, “Propellant 23,” which aired early in 1962, confirmed this perception. He told me during an interview that he still thinks of Blackman as “a formidable female. She didn’t have any charm.” In that interview conducted in 2005, he described Blackman as “rather a big woman and rather awkward. . . . She didn’t look very feminine.” I was intrigued by the way his memory of the character as physical and aggressive had shaped his memory of the physicality of the actor who played her. She is neither big, nor awkward. Patrick Macnee, her *Avengers* co-star, has often said, “Honor Blackman is the most beautiful woman in the world” (Murray, 1998, p. 22). As recently as June, 2006, a poll conducted by the UK’s Bottlegreen Drinks company designated Blackman as the 6th most beautiful woman in Britain (“Contactmusic.com NEWS,” 2006). She did, after all, play the role of *Pussy Galore* in *Goldfinger*. While some men were fascinated by her and longed to see her—for instance, Peter O’Toole confided “Only Mrs. Gale . . . could induce me to leave the pubs before closing time” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 154)—a number of other men were repulsed—or threatened—and wanted to “mock” her or, worse, punch her.

Those negative, mocking, ego-threatened male viewer responses to Cathy Gale support Butler's claim that, "The various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts there would be no gender at all. . . . Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (1990, p. 140). Cathy Gale was acting a "man's role" as Brian Clemens put it. Some male viewers resented her for acting the part with characteristics their culture had assigned to men. The fact that Honor Blackman is also an extremely beautiful woman, I assert, disrupted their sense of certainty about their own masculinity as well as their comfort with their gender identity. In Miller's (1997) chapter entitled, SEX, in his book, *The Avengers*, he asserts:

Mrs. Gale is a Monica Seles *avant la lettre* [before the concept of such a woman existed], screaming as she does battle with assailants in ways that made a few male viewers anxious. . . . and the pugnaciousness of her pose and face counteract any sense that the shrieks disarm her; rather, sexuality, power and the *look out* at the male form and its gaze are foregrounded.¹³ (p. 69)

Miller recognized power in her gaze, but also a challenge that made men uncomfortable. He notes in the same chapter that one male French magazine reviewer of the DVD re-release in the 1990s saw Cathy as "a feminist before her time and vaguely lesbian" (p. 68). That challenge to male authority and her invulnerability in the physical—the space wherein men have always had the advantage—still resonates with some male viewers.

¹³ Miller explained the last phrase of this comment: "I meant that she is both staring at the male body to evaluate it, compete with it, devour it; and that she is returning the gaze of the male at her."

Besides her ability to physically fight men and win, other aspects of Cathy Gale disturbed male viewers and network executives alike. Casting a woman in an adventure series in the first place, then not having a romantic interest between the male and female leads “shocked the network executives” (Macnee & Cameron, 1989, p. 231). Miller (1997) echoes that assertion: “Action series had especially strict segregation [between male and female roles], with very few heterosocial partnerships. This was a male world concerned with the problems of crime” (p. 65). He quotes contemporaneous reviewer, Paul Black, who said of Cathy Gale 1962, “What a horrible discomfort awaits any crook who tries to reach the woman in her” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 89). The Discourse created when a beautiful woman credibly played a part developed with male characteristics in a crime series, before second-wave feminism, denaturalized viewers’ ingrained concepts of gender.

As Foucault (1980) points out in his discussion of Herculine, in modern nations, “everybody was to have one and only one sex. . . . as for the elements of other sex that might appear, that could only be accidental, superficial, or even quite simply illusory” (p. viii). Men wanted to fight Honor Blackman to prove the superficiality and illusory nature of her physical strength and abilities. She appeared to have elements of both sexes and that threatened some viewers and attracted those who identified with the ambiguity of her gender. In fact, Honor Blackman’s portrayal of Cathy Gale is credited for “encouraging the spread of the word ‘kinky’ into every day parlance” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 44). This in spite of—or perhaps, in part, because of—the fact that the character Blackman performed was “quite chaste” (Madden, 2000).

For Butler, all gender is “performative.” Gender is “a strategy of survival within compulsory systems,” not a natural phenomenon (J. Butler, 1990, p. 139). Butler argues that despite these oppressive hegemonic forces, “the construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender” (p. 138). Butler believes that the “parody of gender” whether subtle or blatant, has subversive potential. She argues that “just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as* natural, so these surfaces can become the site of dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (p. 146). This performative status of “natural” gender opens up the potential for political agency:

The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (p. 147)

In Butler’s view, the binaries of gender identity are maintained by repeated performance within the discursive framework of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality.

Blackman’s weekly performance as a fiercely humanitarian woman with a Ph.D., a black belt in judo, and an expertise with firearms was a “stylized repetition of acts” that sent a confusing gender message to some viewers in an era of severe compulsory heterosexuality. She was neither domestic, nor submissive. When she threw large men across the set during live action taping, she acted gender in a way viewers had never

seen from a woman actor. In Miller's (1997) media studies analysis of *The Avengers* phenomenon, he concludes, "There is, then, a play here between deeply orthodox methods of sexual representation, new ideas about gender and power, generic norms and formal innovation" (p. 159). The Discourse enacted by Cathy Gale did not fit the hegemonic forces of 1960s British society. Yet, all the **women** I interviewed, whether born or trans, unanimously agreed that Honor Blackman—and Cathy Gale—was, and still is, strikingly beautiful, extremely feminine, delightfully sexy, and the sheer embodiment of female charm.

"Once I Acted Cathy, . . . Women Felt More Capable in All Sorts of Directions"
--Honor Blackman, personal interview, July 2006

When analyzing the data, it became apparent during initial coding and subsequent grouping that all 17 stories shared similar themes. However, the three trans-women's stories had some variations within those themes from the biologically-born women. I will outline the most significant ones here and attempt to provide adequate context from the episodes and artifacts to assist those readers who are unfamiliar with *The Avengers*. The data revealed striking similarities between all 17 stories, but certain aspects of the trans-women's stories raise some interesting questions about the socio-cultural hegemonic forces that construct gender identities. While the trans-women's initial answers to my questions were similar to the others, the discussions that followed often revealed mirror opposite details. For example, when asked why Cathy Gale influenced them, all said that they wanted to be like her. But it became evident as they elaborated, that the women-born-women, as Hill (2000), aptly calls biologically-born

women, wanted to acquire her “masculine” power and assertiveness, and the trans-women wanted to learn how to exhibit her feminine grace and style.

Media scholars have recognized various ways women identify with the women actors they admire. Stacy (1994) identifies four of those interactions: pretending, resembling, imitating, and copying. Rubin and McHugh (1987) point out that television viewers develop “parasocial relationships” with characters in the media. These relationships can last even after the television set is turned off (p. 280). Using a modified Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI), they surveyed 303 college students to find the degree of importance they placed on developing a parasocial relationship with their favorite television performer (p. 285). They found that “media relationships can be seen as functional alternatives to interpersonal relationships” (p. 288). They argue that interpersonal and parasocial relationships “follow a similar process of development” (p. 288). Furthermore, “when television personalities are socially attractive and create the context for interaction, rewarding relationships develop” (p. 288). But, Corner (1999), a communications studies scholar, insists:

More broad approaches to enquiry need advancing because our relative ignorance about the processes of sense-making from television’s factual and fictional output is as great as that about the different conditions and circumstances of its viewing and its cultural uses within daily and weekly routine. (p. 92)

My findings indicate that, while these women began their relationship with Cathy Gale with one or more of those interactions described by Stacy (1994), they went much further, incorporating chosen characteristics into their adult identities.

For the women I interviewed, watching *The Avengers* before there were any other feminist examples inspired self-directed identity-forming processes that led to transformational change and meaning-making. All the women in this study had been conditioned by their culture to exhibit traditional gender characteristics. The biologically-born and reared women were fascinated by the way Honor Blackman, as Cathy Gale, enacted traditionally male characteristics—strength, aggressiveness, power. The biologically-born men whose core gender identities were female had been taught to be aggressive and powerful and, of course, had developed more muscle strength than the biologically-born women. They learned how to **keep** those qualities as females, and remain feminine, from watching and engaging with Cathy Gale. All the women agreed that strong, positive role models were important for women, but while the women-born-women felt that **finding** role models was important, the trans-women realized that **being** role models was essential. The women-born-women found strength in having someone to emulate while learning to be empowered. That desire for inspiration has stayed with them and they have aggressively sought role models to follow. On the other hand, the trans-women became leaders and felt little need after a time to seek guidance. Instead, they became models for others and sought leadership positions. Those attributes—follower and leader—are traditionally culturally assigned to women and men respectively.

Two of the trans-women are in their mid-60s and one was 58. They are all professional, successful, and confident. Analysis of their stories revealed three major moments of learning. First, these women learned that they could retain some of the traditionally male characteristics they learned growing up as boys, but enact that part of their personality as women, rather than suppress it. They had been shown an example of a woman who defied traditional gender roles successfully. Blackman enacted a character whose style they could comfortably emulate and incorporate into their lives. Second, they learned to incorporate Cathy Gale's strong moral and ethical perspectives into their own developing female identities—during and after transition. Finally, they learned the value of role models for women—and they became role models for others. In what follows, I will more fully explicate these three important sites of learning.

Defying Traditional Roles—Kick-Ass, Feminine Women

Astrid is a trans-woman who is not *out* as a trans-woman (Conway, 2003). In fact, when asked to select her pseudonym, her first choice was, “Low Profile.” She is in what Conway (2003) terms *deep stealth mode*. That is, she is “passing” as a woman-born-woman. In Conway's terms, Astrid

worked hard during [her] early post-transition years to refine all aspects of presentation and behaviour that affect [her] passability. This involves . . . many compromises and tradeoffs while searching for a consistent persona and image that fits well with [her] physical presence. (p. 6)

With her 5'6" height and delicate frame, Astrid has worked hard to pass and, indeed, she has been successful. She has lovely white/gray hair, laughing blue eyes, and just a hint of middle age spread, which belies her age of 65. Her hobbies include flying her airplane, gardening and reading about UK history. In her soft voice, she confided that she grew up in Liverpool and went to school with George Harrison and Paul McCartney, although they were younger than she. Though she did not know them, she "remembered them clearly in their school uniforms—black blazers and flannels." She did, however, know Stuart Sutcliffe, an early Beatle, who "was the one who died," she said frowning and shaking her white head sadly. As she went on to talk about her school days, and playing in the garden with Stuart, it was difficult to remember that she was reminiscing about her childhood as an acting and biologically-sexed male in a boy's school of "a thousand boys."

All three trans-women describe a disorienting dilemma (J. Mezirow, 1995) that led to their decision to transition. Astrid described hers this way:

Now let me see, I'd be 28 in 1969. You see, up until then I'd been trying to live as a heterosexual male. Trying to. Never had any girlfriends and eventually, when I'd be about 27, I decided that I've got to crack this. I've got to resolve this one way or the other. So when I was 28, I had my first ever affair—with a woman. And um, I had sex with her and decided, almost instantly . . . I mean, my first reaction was, "God! Is this what all the fuss is about? Why does anybody want to do this? How horrid!" But that exacerbated my transsexuality and blew

the lid off completely. I was in an obsessive state and I went into pathological depression. At this point, I was desperate, I had to seek help.

Being forced to act as male and live in that male world, she was “being eaten away from the inside.” Telling her story, she outlined her carefully planned, developed, and enacted female identity as it was fine-tuned throughout the transition process. Eventually, she had to integrate her new female self with what remained of her old identity. With a twinkle in her eye, she grinned at me as she described her transition: “It’s like being an industrial spy. You’re established wherever it is you’re working, but at all times, you feel people’s eyes on your back.” But she was determined to pass as a woman-born-woman.

Astrid’s efforts illustrate Foucault’s (1988a) practice of self-invention by viewing the self/subject as a work of art that can be constructed to resist the dominant hegemony that would impose a gender biologically and culturally assigned to her. Instead, Astrid has reinvented herself with a feminine gender identity, and she did it with deliberate, artistic design. According to Foucault, one’s task, if we are to resist hegemonic forces, is “to get free of oneself” (Foucault, 1988b, p. 8) in order to reinscribe ourselves as a liberal individual capable of resisting social-cultural-political inscription.

Astrid did not begin the transitioning process until she was 34. She explained the 6-year period between her disorienting sexual encounter and beginning the process: “I thought . . . I was still . . . see, my parents were still alive. They never would have understood it in a million years!” After her parents died, she “had to find a doctor somewhere who was prepared to help me.” She began immediately: “more or less as

soon as my mother died, instantly I sort of implemented an action plan that had been on the blocks for a long time, waiting to be implemented.” Next, she told her employer, and she explained “that meant I had to resign my employment and I was unemployed for a full year; I had difficulty getting employment. Foolishly, I was telling people what I was.” But she persevered and eventually got a job because she “kept schtumm.”¹⁴ She learned then that it was different for women in the workforce. Shaking her head in disgust, she explained, “I was paid a fraction of what I’d been earning.” That, too, was part of her attraction to Cathy Gale who earned the respect of the academic and archaeological community and was “well compensated for her efforts and education.”

Astrid continued to live as a woman and take college courses. She also took a course to help her transition: “It was 1974 when I went on that course and they taught me deportment and dress and so forth. From 1962 [when she watched Cathy Gale] to 1974, that’s 12 years, isn’t it? So Cathy Gale had remained back of my mind throughout all those years.” Over a decade after first watching Cathy Gale, she had not forgotten how she had admired the character. As an administrator “in charge of a large male workforce,” Astrid needed a female role model from whom she could learn how to not “default into male mode when [she] needed to assert [herself].” She explained that the formal instruction she received during transition and post-op “was essentially to teach men how to look and act and sound like women. Not to teach men to *be* women.” Learning to *be* a woman was a self-directed learning project for which she needed a model. She chose Cathy Gale because she was the only female she knew who “was a full

¹⁴ Schtumm is her colloquialism for “quiet.”

protagonist in what she was doing, rather than someone who reacts.” She saw Cathy as very feminine—but “commanding when she needed to be.” She stated that “Cathy was brilliant and didn’t mind everybody knowing it. That was important to me. I learned that, contrary to what society had taught me growing up, you didn’t have to pretend to be an idiot” to be a woman. She learned that “you could speak intelligently and take some chap to task, you know, if he’d got it wrong.” She went on:

In those days, I mean, the girls that I knew at school were all channeled towards teaching, nursing, um, maybe going to university with the intention of staying in academics. They never said they were becoming doctors or barristers or solicitors. And they did nothing commanding. There wasn’t—up until then—there definitely was a shortage of role models of that kind. . . But *once Cathy Gale hit the screen, I mean, you know, the world was never the same again.*

Having grown up biologically male, she had been trained to be “a full protagonist in her life.” Being a full protagonist meant being assertively herself—proactively creating her gender identity and not letting society control it for her. It also meant being authoritative in the workplace. Using Cathy Gale as a model, she taught herself how to be herself and how to *be* a woman with selectively chosen, traditionally male characteristics. Cathy helped her incorporate the male characteristics she wanted to retain into her female identity—those that let her be in charge of men and be commanding. She learned to defy culturally imbedded role models for women while still being perceived as female.

China, on the other hand, is a trans-woman who is fully and flamboyantly *out*. She makes a comfortable living by sharing her experiences as someone who has

experienced life in the body of both genders. Sitting in the quaint, tasteful living room of her small third-story flat, enjoying a breathtaking view of the ocean and a gentle breeze through the open window, we sipped tea and discussed Cathy Gale. China, I believe, could certainly pass if she chose. She is a lovely woman with an athletic, but not necessarily masculine, build. As Conway (2003) points out, “people are generally more understanding and forgiving of a transitioner who looks really good. You can almost read folks’ minds as they think, ‘I guess you had to become a woman if you look like that!’” (p. 10). China might fall into that category. With a vivacious charm and infectious smile, she told me, “You see, I *am* Cathy Gale.”

China and her partner conduct training seminars for biologically-born professional women on developing an **empowered** female identity, or *empowered feminine essence*, as she calls it. China believes women are taught to suppress their true “feminine” selves because men want to keep them powerless. Companies contract her consulting firm to help their female employees become more assertive, confident—empowered. She bases the training on what she has learned living as both a male, for the first 40 years of her life, and as a woman for the remainder of her 58 years. Like Astrid, China recognizes that women are often not taught to be the *protagonists in their own lives*. China explained:

Funnily enough, when I was transitioning, one of my fears was that I’d turn into the wimpy little woman—the little washer. And what’s happened is, you know, the woman I’ve become is more like Cathy Gale than anything else. I resonate with the character. I do. . . because I’m out there—and I’m dangerous. . . . People

find me quite scary—men find me scary. It's like her. . . . It's about edge—that fearless edge. Being trans is very interesting, because you create your own persona. I created myself to be her.

China created her gender by performing it, just as Butler (1990) argues. She has chosen traits from both socially constructed concepts of traditional gender roles to design her female identity and find her “feminine essence.” She is the proactive protagonist who designed herself and is happy with the result of her artistry. Her attitude is one of constant self-reflexive thinking. She has examined how she came to become “like Cathy Gale”:

I had to fit it in with this [she makes a sweeping gesture that indicates she means her tall athletic body, dressed in white jeans and a pink camisole]. I wasn't taught to diminish myself. And so I thought, Oh! I'll be Cathy Gale—that looks so good. No, I didn't think that [she laughs]. It evolved, all right? I mean, I'm so much more extroverted and more, sort of flamboyant a character as a woman. As a man, I just [pause] tried to keep this China thing locked in the basement; GOD! What a job that was.

Robin: I can imagine.

It was hell on earth just keeping this in, because I'm, you know, as you can see, I'm really a sort of very energetic, both mentally and physically, full of ideas and mental activity. So I had to focus on that in Cathy. That's what is the same as me. Not the conservative clothes or the black leather—but the mental and physical activity—And the fearlessness—but perhaps I was past caring. (laughs)

Like Astrid, she chose elements of Cathy to incorporate, but they were the important things—the essence of her, the mental and physical. China’s sense of style is all hers, she says, but Cathy Gale was “a student of life and the universe, too.” China insisted that it was not because Cathy “looks so good” that she wanted to be her—but it was the fact that she was “energetic of mind and body” and “an expert on everything [China] considers interesting” and she “took on life, you know?”

China found that being like Cathy was empowering, and she felt that she could use her self-directed learning project—the creation of her feminine *self* to have that “fearless edge”—to teach women-born-women self-empowerment: “You see, nobody told me that I was supposed to be powerless. I just made myself up according to how I felt and how I felt was remarkably like Cathy Gale.” She elaborated:

One day, at work, this Mrs. _____, she said to me, “Don’t you find you’ve lost a lot of power by doing this?” I said, “Oddly enough, I’ve gained it.” I’d distinctly gained power . . . women grow up as girls, and go through the girl system, you know? You go to girl school and do all these girl things. I think there are a lot of subtle messages in your teachings—that sort of hesitation and inferiority and powerlessness. Now I, on the other hand, I’m a modern-day Aphrodite; I was born fully formed, you know, as an adult woman. . . . I think I’ve been given some special insight into the world, you know? I do. I mean, I’m absolutely thrilled. This is what I teach.

She and her partner have been hired by some of the biggest companies in the UK to train their female officers and executives. China, essentially, trains other women to be like

Cathy Gale. A self-described “student of life and the universe,” she believes women are taught as girls that they should be weak and that to show strength is to be unfeminine. That culturally imposed thinking was certainly evident in some male—and probably some female—viewers’ negative responses to Cathy Gale. China’s mission is to teach women how liberating it is to be strong, assertive, and proactive. She insists that women can recreate themselves by engaging in self-directed learning projects that help them find the feminine essence inside which has been crushed out by the confines of societal norms that, through Discourse, posit women as the weaker sex. Since she became a woman after living as a man, she is able to resist and reject those confines in the way Foucault (1979; 1980; 1988a) theorizes and encourages individuals to do.

In sharp contrast to the other two trans-women, Chris’s story is tragic and heartbreaking. She was born with Klinefelter’s Syndrome 2 (XXXY) and intersex. Raised as a girl until age five, she was at that time surgically given the appearance of male-only genitalia. This led to decades of suffering the negative effects of testosterone injections as well as an internal gender conflict. She is certain that she was born “chemically female.” When she, as an adult in her 50s, transitioned *back* to female, the years of testosterone therapy made it difficult. Like Astrid, she wants to pass as female, but has difficulty because of her physical stature. She has often been “clocked” or publicly outed.

Chris picked me up at the train station and drove us to a quiet park for the interview. She is a nurse by profession, in her mid 60s, with dark brooding eyes and a smile that is bright, quick, and surprising. Chris chatted about her part of the country as

she drove. After settling at a picnic table set in a secluded area of the park, with the lush English foliage surrounding us, she revealed the story of her *second* sexual reassignment—the one she chose for herself. As she talked, she clasped and unclasped her thin, well-manicured hands. Like Astrid, she had been in her early 20s when she watched the Cathy Gale *Avengers*. Her affinity for the character was immediate and lasting. Nearly three decades later, after years of emotional and physical turmoil, she decided to seek gender reassignment, and it was then that she thought back to the relationship she had developed with the television character.

Chris, too, modeled herself on Cathy Gale as she went through the transition process. Specifically, she remembered Cathy's physical strength (although Honor Blackman is a small woman) and her aggressiveness and felt, like Astrid, that there was no one else from whom she could (re)learn to "walk as a girl who has been made strong." Unlike Astrid and China, Chris felt that her memories of the television program were insufficient for her study. She bought VHS tapes of some Cathy Gale *Avengers* and used them for self-directed instruction on, "how to walk, how to enter a room—head held high, how to look men in the eye without triggering a testosterone match." She also tried to match the tenor of Honor Blackman's voice. "If I had been able to remain the girl I was born as," she told me with a wry, sad smile, "I think I would have been very much like Cathy. As it is, I try my best to be a passable imitation."

Just as it was with Astrid, it is Cathy Gale's ability to be strong yet remain cool and elegant in the face of confrontation that fascinates and inspires Chris. Studying Cathy has helped keep her from "defaulting to male mode" as well. Having been "forced

to live so long as a man,” however, makes it difficult for her. The fact that Cathy “gets mad and gets her point across without being a bitch” encourages her. She believes that her quick temper is due, in part, to her “years of testosterone therapy” and it has been difficult for her to live as a woman without “projecting some male vibes that make men mean.” With an embarrassed grin, she insisted, “If I had been left as a girl, I may have been happier and not so bad-tempered.” She, like Cathy, “just get[s] so furious at the injustice, especially the injustices done to innocents who are simply born different than the mainstream.” Cathy could not have said it better or with more conviction.

Astrid and Chris both incorporated Cathy’s calm reserve; China, on the other hand, focused on the other side of her personality—her sharp wit and abundance of energy. Yet all three were attracted to the aspects of her character that were not culturally considered feminine.

Incorporating Cathy’s Strong Ethics and Morals—Feminine/ist Courage

Since these women were already physically strong, it was Cathy’s inner strength and courage, her unswerving ethics that attracted their attention. As a result of her history, Chris was desperately seeking an example of a woman with strength of character who “was not just the suffering martyr, you see. That was the only representation on television of strong women before Cathy.” She did not want to be like the television women who “were admired because of all the pain they had endured. And people, blokes I expect, always wrote them as smiling through tears. That’s simply sick.” Chris suffered and survived abuse that was both accidental—doctors and parents [mis]choosing her sex

for her—and intentional—sexual abuse endured as a “feminine man” in school and in the military. What attracted her to Cathy Gale was that she was completely independent of other people, and that she was “different from other women” and not ashamed of it. “Quite the contrary,” Chris said with a mischievous smile, “she was confident, independent, and *impenetrable*.” Chris remembered much about the character’s background,¹⁵ and discussed episodes that she thought revealed the depth of Cathy’s fortitude and ethical convictions.

In the episode, “The Outside-In Man,” for example, Cathy is trying to help an ex-agent who had been held captive for 5 years in a Middle Eastern prison camp. She believes he may be trying to kill the ex-patriot who was responsible for his imprisonment and for his partner’s death. She also believes that while imprisoned he was tortured and brainwashed, and he is now a broken man. She wants to prevent him from coming to further harm. (The poor treatment of people who have served their country and are no longer useful to the government is a frequent theme in these stories.) When she appeals for help from his partner’s widow, Mrs. Rainer, she finds that the widow wants him to assassinate the man, even if it means the ex-agent will lose his life in the process. Here is a bit of that discussion:

Cathy: You’re a very vindictive woman, Mrs. Rainer.

Mrs. R: (with a sarcastic smirk) I thought you said you understood my feelings.

¹⁵ Viewers knew that Mrs. Gale was a widow and had painful experiences in her past. It was part of the character development. The episodes written for Dr. David Keel, the male character she replaced, may have been the basis for making her a widow. Dr. Keel’s character was driven to help Steed because of the murder of his fiancé in the first episode, “Hot Snow.” The loss of a loved one was part of the original character.

Cathy: For the loss of a husband, yes, but not for murder—or revenge.

Mrs. R: You don't know what it's like to be made a widow.

Cathy: (with a slight pause and brief expression of sadness) Yes I do.

Cathy storms out, in a hurry to track down and save the unfortunate gentleman.

The Avengers fans know that Cathy's husband was murdered in the Mau Mau uprising against British occupation of Kenya and that she witnessed his death. But she clearly does not see herself as a victim, nor does her audience. Cathy is no suffering martyr. She prefers to fight for the weak, even a brainwashed ex-agent. She is determined to stop him from assassinating a wicked man to prevent more harm coming to an already damaged man. "Rebuilding ones' life and centering it on helping others to dissipate pain" is one attribute that Chris chose to learn and incorporate from her interaction with Cathy. "She uses her experiences, both the good and the bad, to make herself a better person and to help people," Chris added,

I've kept that in mind all these years. She [Cathy Gale] does not live in the past. That's been one of the hardest things for me during all of this. You see, when suffering is not recognized early enough by family and professionals, it's difficult to tolerate living in the distressing condition of not having a solution to gender conflict. I admire Mrs. Gale because she channels her past suffering into present action against the suffering of others.

She continued, "Cathy never says, 'I've suffered loss and pain,' but she must have done. I know she's just a character—it's a performance, but she's really the only person I

know that turns loss into determination to do something good.” She went on to discuss some episodes that illustrated Cathy Gale’s fierce commitment to fighting for someone who has been wronged in some way. “I suppose it’s silly,” she confided, “but I enjoy seeing a woman win every time. And, to be sure, those old shows are more realistic than anything today.” Chris uses her parasocial relationship with Cathy Gale to do more than just imitate her walk; she imagines Cathy’s inner strength of character and ethics and constructs her own in that image. Her tale confirms Mezirow’s (2000) argument that “imagination is central to ‘trying on’ another’s point of view” (p. 20). And it is by trying on previously untried frames of mind that adults construct new meanings for themselves.

Astrid also commented on Cathy’s strength and how it affected her. A self-identified feminist, Astrid, therefore, chose to model certain aspects of Cathy’s character in creating her female/feminist identity and she particularly liked the fact that Cathy “stood up for her convictions.” She chuckled and told me, “It’s bits I happen to remember and use. I was, shall we say, distilling the essence from Cathy Gale, I wasn’t swallowing her whole.” Since Astrid was a “government official,” Gale’s character, who consulted for a government agency and “improved things for other people” had additional appeal. Cathy Gale helped Astrid become a believable female government official at a time when there were few women with authority in government.

You see, a lot of this is the way that, generally, what and how gender reassigned persons think of themselves—sort of our outlook upon the world. . . . We are self-designed, you see, more than most people. It is a great opportunity that people before did not have. I was very early, you see, and very lucky.

In that design, she was extremely selective in her choice of models. Scarlett O'Hara, for example, she assured me, "was a practical, not in the least bit romantic character, able to assert herself and take control of the situation and make people do what she wanted."

But she would not have been an ideal role model because, unlike Cathy Gale, Astrid laughingly told me, "One can't help wondering whether, if Scarlett O'Hara had been a real person living in the present day, she'd end up going to a gender reassignment clinic and becoming a bloke." Scarlett only cared for Scarlett. In her profession, Astrid wanted to convey authority tempered with caring and femininity and, for that, she looked only to Cathy Gale. As she told her story, she showed me photographs of herself before, during and after her sexual reassignment, and later emailed me copies of several of those photos. I was amazed by how similar her posture and expressions in those early photographs were to those of Cathy Gale.

When China talked of Honor Blackman's activism and commitment to social justice and equality she again likened herself to the actor:

You see, it's the same as me. I mean, I am . . . I was really worried, and I did— [in] 2001, there was a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights which stated that, in essence, that the law in this country is a breach of human rights.

How to change the law, then? [to change British law to better protect the rights of transsexuals] God, the resistance [to giving rights to transsexuals], you know?

But they [Britons] had to, [because of the ECHR]. . . . I'm on the lists, you know, when the media have lists of people who'll talk about it [transsexual issues]? So the BBC called me and they said "we need somebody for the 6:00

and the 10:00 national news, and this is, all over the country. And beamed all over the world. Will you do it?” [she would have to come out as a trans-woman on world-wide television] and I thought, “the world is coming out . . . it’s coming out. Can I do this?”

Robin: That would be out.

So China came out on the 6:00 p.m. BBC News. Like the character of Cathy Gale, China decided to take action out of her desire to make things right and help people. She bases her decisions on her convictions, not on what might be the most safe, expedient or “facile” for her. As one of Hill’s (2000) informants stressed, MTF transsexuals often do not advertise their identity for very pragmatic reasons: “It’s to keep from getting murdered, dear. Get it!” (p. 4). But China, like Cathy, is driven to help others despite risk to herself. And also, like Cathy, she has confidence in her abilities:

And I thought, “Aw, shit,” I said, “some other asshole would do it and wouldn’t do it right. I’ll do it.” And so by doing that, I realized that one of the greatest things you can do is be absolutely open. An example to everyone. It’s almost like a kind of passport to invulnerability, actually. It’s a strange thing. Before, I mean, I defended myself. . . I made this male persona, you know, to look through and that didn’t work at all. I didn’t need to lie to the world. I was in stealth for many years and now I’m fully out and I can *do* things, help people. . . . I’ve always wondered if Honor Blackman had an excuse to sort of show herself onscreen. To be herself—in a way.

She knows that Blackman is an activist and a feminist and believes that she took the opportunity to play Cathy Gale in order to show women that they could be more, just as China made the decision to talk to the national press about human rights.

While Honor Blackman insists that she was not *fully* aware of the impact the character would have on women when she was creating and acting her, she reminisced about her time as Cathy Gale:

I certainly remember housewives who had children and were stuck—or they felt they were stuck—and then they took inspiration to have another go at life, you know—a career. And having done so, I think they were quite glad. They hadn't considered, until then, what women were capable of. Women felt more capable in all sorts of directions.

She said she received mail about “such things” regularly during her time on *The Avengers*, “and it was amazing and quite gratifying. . . . It was awfully nice to hear because, I mean, I'm just an actress playing a part. Of course, you put so much of yourself into it.” She added, “But one doesn't start out with those ideas.” She did not fight to keep Cathy Gale strong in order to inspire the women in her audience, she insists, but she was determined to do a good job. She recognized at the time that, “Cathy was the first character who'd really been allowed to be the intellectual equal of the fellow. I mean, before that, one had sort of blue-stockings ladies, but you'd never had a good-looking shrewd woman who won over men.” Intentional or not, Honor Blackman “kicked open the doors for future TV heroines” (T. Miller, 1997, p. 68) and some doors for many women viewers as well.

China equates her decision to be openly out in order to fight a political battle that would help all non-heterosexuals, to Blackman's "showing herself" onscreen. It took courage to do it, but she is happier now. That inner strength and happiness is what she encourages in the women who attend her empowerment seminars. She talks to women about "gender as being holistic—the body, the spirit, the *role*." Her heavy emphasis of the word "role" certainly supports Butler's theory that gender is performative. China tries to help women see that they have been taught a particular submissive, passive role, because of their gender, but that is only an illusion, a lesson learned that can be unlearned. She works to help women find "who they truly are—their feminine essence." Only then, she believes, can women be happy, when they allow themselves to be who they were born to be inside. And, she believes, women were meant to have strength, but are taught to suppress it. She explained,

I think that's one thing that's really touched me, over the years. People say to me—I talk in the seminars and I say, "So what do you all regard as masculine attributes?" Most often, it comes down to strength. Women are afraid to have strength.

Cathy Gale showed China that women could and should have strength. She, in turn, shows others. The seminars and workshops she facilitates are about developing inner strength. One of them is entitled, *Value, Values and Courage*. The focus of this workshop is to help participants "clarify their own values as women—what is important to us and to decide if we are living these values. If we are not living them because of our fears, real or imagined, what that does to our lives and hearts." Cathy Gale had a strong

ethical and moral code and lived by her values and no one else's. She was scripted that way. In his notes about Cathy Gale, to the writers and the rest of the creative team, producer Leonard White wrote: "She must above all have the humanitarian and the moral attitude to the story. She wants to help those who are in peril or distress. She cares about them" (D. Rogers, 1987, p. 15). These trans-women took note of that element of Cathy's character and purposefully incorporated it into their female identities.

Becoming Role Models for All Women—Feminine/ist Leaders

For the trans-women participants in this study, part of that caring for other people developed into the desire to help by modeling characteristics they believed would inspire other women. All three women talked about the need to lead by example. China is a role model for both biologically-born and trans-women; Astrid is a role model for women-born-women in her male-dominated profession; Chris is a role model and mentor to young transitioners and others with gender identity conflicts.

Astrid acknowledges the fact that she "learned a lot about professional behaviour" from watching Cathy Gale, and that she models that to the younger women she supervises. She compartmentalizes her life more than China or Chris, and it is Cathy's professional accomplishments that she most admires and wants to share with other women. Astrid was dismissed from her lucrative position when she told them she was going to begin transition in the 1970s. She was eventually able to obtain employment with her female identity, but only after moving to another town in a different part of the UK. It soon struck her, of course, that she was doing the same job—

had the same “college courses and diplomas”—but was paid “only a fraction” of what she’d earned as a man. She, of course, was passing, so she did not draw attention to herself by complaining or openly discussing the inequity. That lack of action was not a show of feminine weakness, she assured me, “that would be un-Cathy-like.” It was a matter of survival and her commitment to passing. However, she “realized quickly that women had a difficult time” in her profession. She determined to mentor the few women who “were sent to work with [her].” She explained in a shy, modest tone:

During my career, at different times, not very often, but maybe once or twice, a young woman has been sent to work with me, and I was—she was, how shall I say, influenced—not towards some kind of another Cathy Gale, [laughs] but she’s been influenced to, sort of, take her life in her hands and do something with it. She’s seen what I’ve done with it—without knowing how I . . . anything of my background. And um, so women have somehow taken inspiration from that—from what I learned from Cathy Gale. I tried to help them, you see. Women don’t have many role models.

She is proud that she has helped the women who have “come along in [her] traditionally male-dominated career path.” The importance of having people or characters in popular culture “one can turn to for instruction” is very important to Astrid. Learning to pass as a biologically-born woman, when the process is not initiated until age 34, is no easy task—even for someone who is “quite slight and delicate” for a man; the need for examples is paramount. Astrid believes that she has provided the same kind of example to the young women who are trying to work in a man’s world as she had in Cathy Gale:

“someone who, you see, can show you how to accomplish a particularly difficult balance” between “commanding and, um—harsh.” Astrid, unlike Chris or China, is the quintessential English lady and would never speak the word “bitch,” but with her blue eyes twinkling a smile at me, I understood that to be the message she wanted to convey. Most women who have been in supervisory roles understand exactly what she means. Cathy Gale manages to strike that balance with her partner, Steed, and with the other men she encounters. She is not a “bitch” by any means, but she is forceful and forthright.

For China, having inner strength and acting ethically, and being a role model for women, has become intertwined with who she is and what she does for a living. She has chosen in recent years to make feminine/feminist leadership her profession. She points out,

It has taken me years to become really, you know, happy with myself. And, it’s just sort of a radical thing to take on doing [changing sex]. I was shocked when I found out what I was. I didn’t want to do this. I wanted to run away from this, because it was too strong.

She found the courage not only to not run away, but also to be true to herself. By literally becoming a trans-woman, who “came out of the box and bingo, there I was,” like the aggressive, confident Cathy Gale, she constructed her happiness. She is a very self-reflexive individual and she realizes that her contentment with life is a choice. She is driven to share with other women her techniques for self-fulfillment and gender identity development. As she put it, “I want to share my observations from my incredibly interesting decimation of the old, male, culturally constructed persona, all right? And the

creation of *my* persona according to my own feelings.” Cathy Gale modeled a woman who was feminine and could still be strong for her audience. Honor Blackman, China pointed out, “created that persona according to what she wanted Cathy to be. I believe it was a way to do what I have done.” To China, Cathy Gale and Honor Blackman are both role models:

When you see Honor Blackman talking now, she’s the same person. So what we actually have here is actually not only Cathy Gale, we have Honor Blackman. . . .

What we have here is really unusual, because she is almost—she’s, like, the same type as me. It’s so interesting. . .

China teaches other women that they can be happy and still be assertive, strong, and find their “true feminine essence” which she believes is squelched in most women by their upbringing. That is why she titled one of her workshop/seminars, *Gender and Power*.

She shared an email with me from one of her workshop participants:

Thinking things through on the way home, I had an insight, and it has transformed part of how I thought my world operated. This is very empowering and freeing, and with it comes a renewed responsibility to myself. I thought the workshop structure was excellent, the lead up was great, and to get in touch with the essence of the female and identify this as a source of strength and power is excellent.

. . . I have always felt comfortable with my understanding and expression of my female / femininity... when we all meditated on and visualised our femininity, what I saw surprised and perplexed me: I saw a breezeblock wall. Hmmm - unusual for a woman who is comfortable!

. . . I realised I could not 'see' this female essence as I was / am separated from its impact. My insight was that part of why I could only see the wall and not my female essence is that I look to other people to define or help me to define who I am! I do this so often in my life and a lot of the time it is unconscious, it is not my own creation, and I am not creating. This is why my 'picture' is incomplete as I don't take time or even commit to taking time and energy to nourish and grow

*'me'. What an insight! It has illuminated so many parts of my life and with this new knowledge I will create the possibility of being there for **me** and committed to my life.*

This response to China's *Gender and Power* workshop mimics the responses I received from women about Cathy Gale's influence and the lessons they took from her. Until something happens to deconstruct socially constructed ideas we have about ourselves, women often absorb societal expectations for who they are—their essence is a performance of someone else's script. China's response to this email was to ask: "Does our gender, our identity, only exist for us in the reflections in other people's eyes?" If so, she says, we cannot be ourselves or be happy. Much of Foucault's thoughts on identity development are represented in the quotes above. Our identities are constructed by the hegemonic forces that construct the Discourse that defines us. That Discourse is so pervasive that we believe it is from nature—natural—true. The implication is that to be anything different is unnatural or false—in effect, wrong or bad. But there is freedom to be found if one resists, deconstructs, analyzes and rejects the confines of socially constructed Discourse (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1984; 1988a). China's intensely curious nature has led to her ability to effectively construct her gender identity to suit "what's really inside," and there she found a space of contentment. She performed her own gender [counter]script, which she in turn shares with others.

In Foucauldian (1980) analysis, gender ambiguous people, like Herculine Barbin, are defined by hegemonic forces that seek to control them. I believe that most people are unable to "create their persona according to how they feel," as China describes her transition and self reconstruction, because of those same dominant and dominating

forces. Women, for a number of reasons, are especially targeted by socio-cultural, religious and political forces for conformity to the “natural” state of domesticity and selflessness. Unless women and other marginalized groups “define who they are” for themselves, we will not be true to ourselves and find our essence, as China points out. As Herculine concluded, living under those conditions is intolerable. Unlike Herculine, whose options were limited, in part, because of the time in which she lived, people have possibilities for resistance and self-actualization.

China is the poster-child for self-actualization. Obviously, China is a role model for a lot of people. She is politically active and works to expand human rights. Her seminar participants, as the email fragment above indicates, are professionals who think of themselves as successful and confident before she sees them, but express that they are considerably enlightened and more self-reflexive after exposure to her example and her ideas. And, China explained, they often “change their lives” in big ways. She is teaching that women can, like Cathy, create and enact real strength and power—the kind that their culture has defined as male—and still be true to their “feminine essence.”

The primary response I received from all the women I interviewed, both women-born-women and trans-women, when asked what they learned from watching Cathy Gale was this: Women can be as strong and aggressive as men and still be feminine—women do not have to be weak or submissive or dependent—women can be fearless. Essentially, the women all told me they learned that they can construct their gender and their lives in any way they chose. China did not go to university; yet, she recognizes the potential for adult learning from popular culture. Despite what some might consider a

limited educational background, China fearlessly began a consulting firm and is successfully helping others by using her own experiences with self-directed learning. Her firm also conducts GLBT job fairs, matching corporations and companies with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender employees. That area of her business is also quite successful.

Finally, Chris has focused her efforts on being a role model for others on people in her community who are gender conflicted. She is very active in the trans community and in trans-feminist groups in the UK and on the Internet. She runs a support group for *trannies* in her Yorkshire village, and sometimes takes runaway MTF transgender teens into her home. They often have nowhere to go, she explained almost in a whisper, “because their families have pitched them out.” She shares her *Avengers* tapes with those guests and tells them, “You’ll probably never walk like Princess Di but, if you watch these and practice, you can learn to be *that* kind of woman.” She helps them learn how to dress and speak: “Even today, Cathy Gale’s style is, in some respects, fashionable. The boots, for instance—I keep telling my girls that the feet and ankles can get you clocked. See how great you can look in leather boots?” She, too, understands the power of pop culture to facilitate learning. Since she works with young people who are gender conflicted in some way, she tries to “find what they like, you know, get in their heads” in order to use their popular entertainments to guide them, as she did for herself with the Cathy Gale *Avengers*. All three women have actively become leaders and teachers in their various professions. They all feel that they have acquired unique knowledges that will make a contribution to the world. Like Leonard White’s instructions to *Avengers*

writers and staff about Cathy, these trans-women *care about people*. They have suffered through extreme disorienting dilemma's and have come through their identity crisis and started new lives by initiating self-directed learning, honing their critical thinking skills, and finding fulfillment in their new lives, in part, by becoming examples to others with less experience and fewer opportunities for self-determination.

Discussion

The Personal Is Political

These three trans-women enacted Butler's (1990) performative gender identity construction and Foucault's (1988a) artistic technologies of self-creation. Like Foucault (1984)—and Cathy Gale—they “think that ethics is a practice: ethos is a manner of being” (p. 377) and they saw that personified in the character of Cathy Gale. Butler and Foucault both believe we should resist the hegemonic forces that define sexuality and gender, and they assert that resistance is possible and self-determination can be the result of that resistance. Arnot (1984), too, argues that cultural hegemony is never total or completely secure:

Cultural hegemony is still a weapon which must be continually struggled for, won and maintained. Women in this analysis must offer consciously or unconsciously their ‘consent’ to their subordination before male power is secured. They are encouraged ‘freely’ to choose their inferior status and to accept their exploitation as natural. In this sense, the production of gender differences

becomes a critical point of gender struggle and reproduction, the site of gender control. (p. 66)

These trans-women have chosen to reject that subordination before male power. Having been biologically male for a time, they were taught to be part of that male hegemony. They did not want to surrender that status as women. The appeal of Cathy Gale—the beautiful woman who acted, or *performed*, in Butler’s apt term, a female role with male characteristics—was that she threw established, hegemonic gender ideals over her shoulder with every man she sent crashing to the floor.

These theories of cultural hegemony are the basis for Gramsci’s theories of gendered power relations and their relation to domination and oppression (Mayo, 1999).

He saw

in the education and cultural formation of adults the key to the creation of counter-hegemonic action. He considered such processes essential for subordinated social groups to engage successfully in the ‘war of position’ necessary to challenge the bourgeois state and transform it into one that represents broader interests. (p. 53)

Gramsci believed in using the popular to reach and teach those subordinated social groups (Mayo, 1999). This study offers evidence that a television character facilitated an adult learning situation for these trans-women that did, indeed, encourage them to resist those hegemonic forces.

Agger (1992) insists that “hegemonic culture attempts to define culture from the top down in terms of the system’s own needs for legitimation, productivism, and

consumerism” (p. 10). Cultural studies, he posits, “emphasizes that culture is conflict over meaning—over how to assign value to human existence, expression, experience” (p. 10). Cultural studies research stresses the “conflictual nature of values and meanings in capitalist, sexist, and racist societies” (p. 10). These conflicts “are powerful initiators of, as well as symptoms of, social change” (p. 10). And Agger stresses that researchers must recognize “the potentials within culture for conflicts to lead to aesthetic and political resistance and thus overall social change” (p. 10). This study supports Agger’s assertions. The appearance of a television character that resisted cultural gender norms and defied gender expectations, before second-wave feminism, made those ideas more prominent, created a conflict of meaning about women’s roles and gender “naturalness.” It was a moment in time and circumstance that illustrates the concept and potentiality of resistance to culturally defined roles theorized by Arnot (1984), Foucault (1979), Butler (1990), Gramsci (Forgacs & Smith, 1985), and Agger (1992) among others. The TV viewers I interviewed for this research experienced significant life-changing learning and perspective transformation from this form of public pedagogy.

Mezirow (2000) describes learning as “an activity resulting from social interaction that involves goals, actions, and conditions under which goal-directed actions are carried out” (p. 13). He insists that the learning that leads to perspective transformation *always* involves these five primary contexts:

- 1) The frame of reference or meaning perspective in which the learning is embedded

- 2) The conditions of communication: language mastery; the codes that delimit categories, constructs, and labels; and the ways in which problematic assertions are validated
- 3) The line of action in which learning occurs
- 4) The self-image of the learner
- 5) The situation encountered, that is, the external circumstances within which an interpretation is made and remembered (pp. 13-14)

He explains that the line of action involves the intentionality of the learner—“both desire and volition, the intensity with which one wants to do something” (p. 15). The trans-women in this study certainly had an intense desire to learn from Cathy Gale, whom they interpreted to be a feminine woman who had not allowed her culture to dictate her gender identity and inscribe the passive, weak behaviors culturally associated with femininity. Instead, they saw in her an example of Butler’s concept of performative gender. They chose to learn from her how to perform the new gender identity they were creating. Mezirow’s definition of self-image as a “felt sense of self—how we feel” (p. 15) was echoed almost verbatim by China and was certainly part of the conversation with Astrid and Chris. These learning contexts were all in place when these women sought out Cathy Gale to help them through the transitioning process and to performatively create their identity. The result of that learning was most certainly *transformational*.

Just as Mezirow is sometimes denigrated by critical educators for his emphasis on individual change rather than social action, Foucault is sometimes criticized for his

philosophy of slow, patient, and persistent analysis of the structures—the language and practices—that constitute us. Many critical theorists and educators prefer revolution. But some adult educators recognized how social transformation is inextricably bound up with individual transformation (Cunningham, 1998; Freire, 1990; Lindeman, 1961). In his later works, Foucault (1988b) expresses his belief that people “are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes [humanism, liberalism] that have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed” (p. 10). This study provides evidence to support the idea that if individuals reinscribe new identities of resistance on themselves—as Honor Blackman did as Cathy Gale, and Astrid, China, and Chris did during their self-recreations—that resistance can spread to others in a variety of ways. They embraced a new idea of womanhood—strong, independent, attractive, militant, activist, kick-butt womanhood—in a *transforming*, *trans-acting*, *transitioning* away from compliance with socially constructed and constituted heterosexual inscriptions.

Public Pedagogy—Schoolhouse Rocked

Adults are already learning from television and other modes of popular culture (Brookfield, 1986). While imitating or identifying with actors on the screen (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Stacey, 1994) may not always, or even usually, lead to meaning-making and lasting learning, this research indicates that when adults are seeking change and desiring learning, they will implement self-directed learning by utilizing the popular media Discourses taking place in their lives. Adult education researchers must develop

and investigate theories of learning that incorporate the public pedagogy taking place when people interact with entertainment media. Chapman (2005a) reminds adult educators that

people of color, women, gay people, disabled people: we travel differently and our theories travel differently. . . . We should not stay home, surrounded by our old, well-worn theories. We need to get out more, invite more novel theories home for dinner, bring them into our classes and, yes, challenge ourselves and our students out of the comfort of the known and easily understood. (p. 311)

It is essential, if adult education is to continue to be relevant, that we develop theories of adult learning based on adults' interaction with the pop culture products they consume. The discipline must recognize that there is a public pedagogy that exists in human interaction with our visual culture (Brown, 2004; Ellsworth, 2005). We are surrounded by Discourses of power and knowledge flowing from popular culture sources and the possibilities for inciting resistance are numerous.

Of course, there are also many possible negative ways that Discourses with some popular culture products affect changes in their consumers. While I was writing this paper, a young man murdered 32 students at Virginia Tech University, and then took his own life. The news media discuss *ad nauseam* the negative effects of video games and television in their attempt to assign blame to elements of popular culture, rather than take a critical look at the capitalist system that creates, markets and profits from those elements. It is ironic that media producers recognize their power to publicly instruct, yet

many adult educators do not. I argue it is increasingly imperative to investigate these sites of adult learning.

The women in this study learned a number of things from watching Cathy Gale in that space of public pedagogy between the screen and the audience. They recognized the embodiment of gender resistance in the body of Honor Blackman's portrayal of Cathy Gale. They incorporated those elements of resistance into their female identities during the transition process and they continue to embrace them. This research highlights the fact that Discourse is more than language. In this case, it included the creators, the scripts, the plots, the actor, the character, the co-stars, the viewers, the fashion, the accidental circumstances of prewritten scripts, the cultural context and the historical space. The data show that the viewers' learning relationships with entertainment television were complicated and complex, but the learning is significant and transformational.

Television is a particularly important portal for learning that needs to be consistently investigated because it has a broad impact on the lives of its audience. As van Zoonen (1994) has found in her feminist television research, "watching television is not an isolated individual experience but thoroughly intertwined with family life, generating conversation, interaction and critique that expands to the church, barber shops, beauty parlours, bars and other places of social gathering" (p. 109). This was certainly evident in these women's stories. They shared the learning they experienced from their interactions with Cathy Gale in many ways. The proliferation of *Avengers* fans in the decades since it aired, and the fact that the show is a Cult TV phenomenon

(Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004; T. Miller, 1997; Soter, 2002), indicates people are *still* discussing *The Avengers* in their places of social gathering. Visual culture researcher Tom Sotor's (2002) chapter on Cathy Gale is entitled, "When a Man Becomes a Woman." Considering the apparent popularity of the character with MTF transsexuals, that title seems particularly intuitive. Cathy Gale rocked her audience's worlds and changed, for some viewers, the definition of "woman."

The process I undertook to purchase Sotor's book illustrates the cult nature of *The Avengers*. I found the book on Amazon.com when I entered the show title in the search field. The title, *Investigating couples: A critical analysis of The Thin Man, The Avengers, and the X-Files* caught my attention. I ordered the book from Amazon Marketplace where one purchases books from individuals. After placing the order, I received an email from the author, who had listed the book on the site, offering to autograph it for me. I emailed and explained I was doing research on contemporaneous women viewers of the Cathy Gale episodes and a regular correspondence ensued. When I began this investigation, the first year of Cathy Gale episodes was not available for purchase in the US. Tom, the seller, offered to make copies on VHS tapes and send them to me, which he subsequently did. He also gave me the home addresses for Honor Blackman and Patrick Macnee that he had in his files. He has since sent me Christmas cards with notes encouraging my research. He is an *Avengers* fan. That is what fans of television shows, comic books, musical artists, etc. do. They eagerly share their learning with others, just as Astrid, China, and Chris have done.

Van Zoonen (1994) argues that “the importance of audience experience is paramount” to researching how media construes “technologies of gender” (p. 108). In an interview with Sotor (2002), conducted in 1999, Blackman’s co-star, Patrick Macnee, summed up the Cathy Gale *Avengers*’ appeal for women viewers:

To me the great secret of *The Avengers* is the knowledge that women can not only keep it going with men, but can top men, and can rescue men, and they can treat men as their friend and equal without emasculating them. There’s too much made of the male-masculine thing, I think. (p. 63)

That is exactly what the participants in this study told me. The key word Macnee used is **knowledge**. Viewers created a new and different knowledge by watching Cathy Gale. Blackman performed a gender identity, in that place of public pedagogy, that was unknown prior to Cathy Gale’s debut. Viewers learned that new knowledge and transformed themselves with it. Hill (2000) describes the self-directed learning utilized by trans-women as “education as a *rite* to be themselves” (Hill, 2000, p. 4). He points out that “this is especially important given the absence of intervening stages that most genetic women travel during their childhood and adolescent development and female social enculturation” (p. 4) For these trans-women, that education, that constructed knowledge was not only essential, it was empowering. Most importantly, learning from Cathy Gale enabled them to keep the male aspects of their essence that they wanted to maintain without feeling the need to “exaggerate traditionally feminine traits . . . and stereotypical feminine gestures” (Hill, 2000, p. 4). The result was a female identity that reflected their essence.

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

This study, I argue, offers evidence that adults do not simply imitate, emulate, or fantasize about television characters. They construct meaning and develop identities based, in part, on what they learn from fictional characters with whom they develop relationships. When asked about the women who watched Cathy Gale in *The Avengers*, Blackman told one researcher:

Actually, it did change women's attitudes to quite a degree in this country.

Inasmuch as what had been depicted in television and movies before, the woman wasn't in the firing line, so to speak, and wasn't competent to be in the firing line, and suddenly it was proven that she was. And possibly more capable. And certainly more capable in the physical line, as well. Women had always taken a back seat. Let's face it, we didn't have women executives and so on and so forth [at that time]. Everything was male. They suddenly thought, "Oh, well, I know it's *just television*, but it is **possible**." They smelt liberty, I think, and freedom and confidence from it. (Soter, 2002, p. 81)

My findings indicate that the messages Honor Blackman received from her fans implying that her portrayal of Cathy Gale taught them to "smell liberty and freedom" were correct. Certainly the trans-women in this study provide a basis for that claim. They imagined other possibilities for themselves besides the sexual constraints inscribed on their bodies their biological construction, as well as by the hegemonic forces of the

dominant culture. The sexual ambiguity Cathy Gale represented challenged their culturally indoctrinated confines of biological sex and traditional gendered attributes.

Critical educators are calling for a research and practice that challenges this rigid indoctrination. Slattery and Morris (1999, p. 31), for instance, argue that “freedom emerges when sedimented preceptors—a term used in postmodern theory to describe entrenched prejudices—are challenged and the complexity and ambiguity of the human condition is foregrounded in the classroom.” This complexity and ambiguity is what television audiences saw in the character of Cathy Gale. As Honor Blackman astutely perceived, “they smelt liberty . . . and freedom.”

A few critical adult educators are encouraging more research in the area of popular culture in order to challenge prejudices. Armstrong (2000) asserts that, “the use of popular culture in creating learning cultures needs a more thorough examination.” And transsexuality is also a “site of learning in adulthood” (Hill, 2000) that warrants further investigation. The serendipitous nature of the trans-women’s response to a larger study of popular culture as a portal of adult learning indicates that both are correct. Adults learn from popular culture in a variety of ways—sometimes ways we cannot predict. Armstrong (2000, p. 3) further proposes that “far from being about passive non-learning, television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues, not least through popular cultural programs.” It certainly raised awareness of gender issues for the participants in this study.

Tisdell and Thompson (2005) note that most research on popular culture and education has “focused on youth as consumers of popular culture and/or how adolescents of different cultural groups draw on popular culture in constructing their identities” (p. 425). As critical adult educators, we must investigate the effects of popular culture on adults and the potentialities of popular culture with respect to adult education. We should critically engage with it and reflect on it, in order to recognize opportunities for utilizing pop culture to more effectively bring about both individual student learning and broader social change.

CROSSING THE POND TO INGRAINED IMPERIALISM: TAKING ON THE EMPIRE’S STORM TROOPER

Introduction

This paper illustrates one aspect of the analysis used for the larger project that comprised my doctoral dissertation, one quilt-piece tacked into the dissertation-quilt as I navigated the data as methodological *bricoleur*. For this paper, I focus on a single interview, out of the 20 interviews conducted for the study, and the narrative methodology I used to understand major themes that surfaced in the data. I began this particular interview with the hope of hearing something more about my dissertation questions surrounding an exploration into the learning experienced by Honor Blackman’s audience when she starred as the powerful, androgynous Dr. Catherine Gale in the 1962-1964 *Avengers* television series. While I did glean interesting responses from this interview about the character, the actor, and the status of women in England during the early 1960s, I was most moved by the participant’s underlying story. It was a narrative of a British subject who feels he has lost something precious to him—his empire and the class structure that created it. It was that narrative that best helped me contextualize and understand elements of the other stories accumulated and analyzed for this project.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on one interview, that of my former (and favorite) creative writing professor from the University of Tennessee, Jon Manchip White, who was scriptwriter for the second Catherine Gale episode entitled “Propellant

23,” which aired on Independent Television (ITV) in the autumn of 1962. I chose to do an in depth narrative analysis of some parts of that interview that, at first, seemed not to relate to my larger investigation of women’s learning through popular television. During the lengthy interview (81 double-spaced pages of transcript), the closely related subjects of class structure, *proper* spoken English, and British imperialism continually crept into White’s recollections. Since I was not particularly listening for these topics, I did not realize how pervasive they were in his responses to my questions until I read the transcripts some time later. Those three themes were so pervasive, I felt compelled to analyze them in order to understand why that was. As an American, I found the proliferation of overt class references and the deeply entrenched notions of language and imperialism fascinating. Moreover, his story gave me a unique look into the depth of class structure, gendered expectations, and entrenched nationalism that permeated the British culture in the early 1960s.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Questions of nationalism, and people’s attachment to the place of their birth and its ideologies, have been the focus of philosophers from Plato to Kristeva (1993). The concept of nationality drives political policies, shapes cultural identities and ideals, and determines individual possibilities. The Bulgarian-born French philosopher Julia Kristeva told O’Grady (1998) that she believes “Origins are one of the most fundamental questions of metaphysics that cannot be entirely avoided in linguistics or psychoanalysis” (p. 10). While analyzing the data for this dissertation, I realized that

issues of origin cannot be avoided in popular cultural analysis either. And while all nations have some sort of class structure, in some countries class consciousness is paramount to their collective consciousness. England, it seems, is one of those countries.

It became clear to me from the first interview, that some narrative analysis would be needed to situate the stories I was collecting about the participants' lives over last 42 years within the context of the participants' origins. Because narratives are "the representation of process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world over time, . . . a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life" (Josselson, 1995, p. 33), narrative analysis had much to add to this study. There are several types of narrative analysis (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Lieblich et al., 1998), but I chose *symbolic convergence theory* (Bormann, 1985) as the sieve through which to shake out and explore concepts of imperialism/nationalism and class in this particular interview. As Freeman (2004) suggests, I needed a methodology that would be "geared toward trying to understand the phenomenon in question and [toward] trying to say something meaningful about it" (p. 71). Therefore, my choice of symbolic convergence theory was "determined by the nature of the phenomenon, what's interesting about it, and what's worth saying" (Freeman, 2004, p. 71).

Symbolic convergence theory is:

the broad framework that accounts for human communication in terms of *homo narrans*. The theory explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual

daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies. (Bormann, 1985, p. 128)

This approach enables researchers to investigate how groups are caught up in narratives that are promoted by the media, history books, oral traditions, and other culturally shared experiences. According to Bormann (1985):

When members of a mass media audience share a fantasy they jointly experience the same emotions, develop common heroes and villains, celebrate certain actions as laudable, and interpret some aspect of their common experience in the same way. They thus come to what [he calls] a ‘symbolic convergence’ about that part of their common experiences. (p. 131)

This theory was helpful in evaluating reactions to the Catherine Gale character, played by Honor Blackman, in *The Avengers*. As part of that interpretation, I attempted to understand colonization, imperialism, and aristocracy as they are understood in Britain, and as they were understood in the 1960s. This method of analyzing White’s responses helped me to do that. In order to understand reactions to the avant-garde, feminist character of Dr. Catherine Gale, as well as to Blackman, the working-class woman who breathed life into her, I had to recognize elements of the “group fantasy; the content of the dramatizing message that sparks the chain of reactions and feelings [that Bormann calls] a fantasy theme” (Bormann, 1985, p. 131). I discovered a cluster of group fantasies that wound their tentacles everywhere beneath the surface of the various stories I analyzed. Cathy Gale’s character was in opposition, in many ways, to Britain’s fantasy themes of women’s domestication, the *rectitude* of rigid class demarcation, oppressive

gender definitions and gender boundaries, unquestioning patriotism and imperial privilege. The message she dramatized was outside cultural norms. Those cultural fantasy themes are somewhat different from the fantasy themes prevalent in the US. We have no aristocracy, no empire, no ruling class (at least in our fantasy themes—reality is another story).

Since I am an American, my understanding of British imperialism and class structure is that of an outsider. Despite the reality of economic class differences in the US, there is no “aristocracy” as such, and the Horatio-Alger-rags-to-riches mythology is encoded in our DNA. Americans from the US believe that class is fluid; that resources are available to everyone here that allow people to “pull-themselves-up-by-their bootstraps” (Weiss, 1988). Having lived in the very different worlds of both the working-poor and the middle-class, I find myself clinging to the belief that class lines can be blurred if one works and studies hard enough, is self-reflexive enough, and is ever diligent in both. Having moved from one class to another, that is a fantasy theme I use to tell and retell my story as I try to make meaning from my experiences. It is also a fantasy theme that is the antithesis of the British concept of class as birthright.

So I analyzed the British class system and imperial privilege as an outsider who “may in fact be unfamiliar with the meanings (much less the emotional evocations) of the fantasy themes that created the necessary common ground” for symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1985, pp. 132-133). Being unfamiliar with such ideas of empire and inherited status makes it all the more fascinating to me as researcher. Gergen (2004) explains that once researchers were

drawn to the idea that social groups were creating their conceptions of reality together, it was a reasonable extension to recognize the central importance of social groups in creating and sustaining the stories by which reality is formed and transformed. If story forms are produced within cultures to make sense of life, the central questions became, “What are the stories available in a culture?” and “How do the stories we tell influence how we live?” (p. 269)

To understand reactions to a British prime-time television character, I had to understand the stories through which *The Avengers* viewers and Cathy Gale’s fans made sense of their world and made meaning in their lives.

Moreover, when a group of people “come to share a cluster of fantasy themes [or stories] and types, they may integrate them into a coherent rhetorical vision of some aspect of their social reality” (Bormann, 1985, p. 133). That social reality becomes a way of life, “a more or less elegant, meaningful whole” (p. 133). Often this rhetorical vision has a label or slogan, but not always. But it is always pervasive and deeply ingrained. When analyzing the 20 stories of British lives for this investigation into what women learned and incorporated into their identities when watching Cathy Gale, it became apparent that the British imperial world-view should be factored into the equation.

Recognizing examples of rhetorical visions in the US is helpful for American researchers trying to understand an application of cultural convergence theory to British narratives. Rhetorical visions such as *the Silent Majority*, *the Religious Right*, *the Moral Majority*, *the Liberal Media*, and *the Far Left*, reflect the “unified putting-together of

various scripts that gives participants a broader view of things” (Bormann, 1985, p. 133). Thinking about those script compilations helped me as I searched for clues indicating the presence of what I will call for the purposes of this article the *Ingrained Imperialist* rhetorical vision. At least for Jon Manchip White, this *Ingrained Imperialist* rhetorical vision is “so all-encompassing and impelling that [it] permeates [his] social reality in all aspects of living. Such all encompassing symbolic systems can be considered *life-style rhetorical visions*” (p. 133). As I attempted to understand British class structure and imperial aspirations, the life-style rhetorical vision shared by most British citizens, it made sense to me to use symbolic convergence theory and its accompanying methodology.

My interview questions for this scriptwriter were simple:

1. Do you remember how women’s roles were viewed in British culture in the early 1960s?
2. Can you tell me anything about women in television in the 1960s?
3. How did people react to the Catherine Gale character?
4. What else do you remember about working on *The Avengers* that might tell me about audience reception of Cathy Gale?

It is noteworthy that I did not ask about class, accents, or imperialism, yet in answer to every question, White either directly mentioned those topics or indirectly alluded to them.

As with the other participants in this study, White signed a consent form allowing me to use data from the interview in my dissertation analysis and in subsequent

publications. I mailed a copy of the transcript to him for comment (member-check) (Merriam, 2001), and he did not request changes. As it turned out, White's memory of both the television character and the actor who played her, Honor Blackman, reflected the somewhat sexist, aesthetically elitist, and classist reviews about her that I found in the literature of the period. I used much of that information in other sections of this dissertation and will not repeat it here.

Symbolic convergence theory allows researchers "to search for boundaries of rhetorical communities in a particular time [the 1960s] and place" (Bormann, 1985, p. 134) rather than select out a few ideas about an individual. Narrative is analyzed for "fantasies [that] are coherent accounts of experience in the past . . . that simplify and form the social reality of the participants" (Bormann, 1985, p. 134). I chose to analyze White's narrative for issues of nationality/imperialism, class structure, and [im]proper English, because those fantasy themes were pervasive in his story, even though I did not approach the topics directly and did not recognize their dominance during the interview. This approach gave me insight into how the boundaries constructed by the convergence of those themes affected the British world-view 40 years ago. And this interview offered me a unique insight into the British culture at that time, since White left for the US in the late 1960s. His recollections of his homeland and its mid-twentieth century culture remained strong and relatively unfiltered, due to nearly 40 years of living outside the UK. When I analyzed the other transcripts in the larger study, less evident, but still present, compatible symbolic fantasies revealed themselves. Without this particular analysis, I would have missed those shared fantasies and the context they provided for

the women's stories. I realized that the *life-style rhetorical vision* that emerged from White's story had a direct impact on his and, since it provided strong evidence of *shared* rhetorical vision, on others' responses to Cathy Gale's disruptive portrayal of *traditional* gender roles. *Tradition*, obviously, is paramount to Britain's imperial rhetorical fantasy, actually defining what it means to be British.

Findings

What follows is a brief overview of the findings. While these themes were present in the other interviews, they were somewhat peripheral in the women's narratives of learning. However, this analysis helped me recognize and contextualize the other responses within the rhetorical vision created by the convergence of the three fantasy themes discovered in White's narrative: class as birthright, proper English, and Imperialism.

British Class Structure

The first recurring fantasy theme that appeared during the interview was the idea of inherent/innate, inherited *class*. The British class system is not directly related to economics as it is in the US *homo narrans*. It is, instead, a matter of bloodlines. In the interview with White, narratives of class appeared in surprising places. When asked about his memories of *The Avengers*, his response was to talk about his career in television and film. He began by explaining how he got into writing for television and film:

JMW: [softly, thoughtfully] Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. I think I possibly wrote that [“Propellant 23”] for them and after that I didn’t even see [watch] it. I’ve literally written so many I don’t—I must have written 20, 25 radio plays. And it was after Cambridge and the Navy—Egyptology [his area of study at Cambridge] was difficult at that time and I was casting about for something to do. So I began writing for radio and [pause] I must have written—I must have written 18 or 20 television plays and I did, you know, 8 or 10 or 12 movies during that time. I was always going from one thing to the other. Yeah. It’s almost like being a journalist really. But I was only—I got into writing radio plays by accident because somebody I served with in the Navy was the son of the owner of the BBC. And he came to see me one day and said, “why don’t you start writing plays for them,” which I did. I wrote 30 minute plays and 60 minute plays and 90 minute plays. It started off helping a friend. And as I said, movies had started losing their artistic quality just at the time, and I decided I would move to television. It was all, uh. . . I think I did it because, people who were—I’d always wanted to write books—and you can only write one book a year. And it’s probably not going to earn you an awful lot of money. So I think my generation went into radio and television and the movies in the way that the previous generation, the Hemingway generation, um, and—um—who are all those American writers at that time [pause]?

R: Faulkner, Gertrude Stein—

JMW: I'm trying to think of one, I was watching a movie last night. Generally speaking they went into journalism, Hemingway was a journalist.

R: umhm

JMW: You know, they wrote for magazines—articles and such.

R: Umhm

JMW: Who wrote *The Big Sur*?

R: The Big. . . .

JMW: You know, I can't remember.

R: I do, and I can't think . . .

JMW: He wrote the one about the Okies going out to California.

R: Oh, Steinbeck!

JMW: Steinbeck, Steinbeck it is. Yeah. He was journalist. They all were.

The above section is only one segment of a lengthy apology for beginning his career in television and film writing, an occupation that he clearly feels is beneath him. At one point he told me, "I've spent my life trying to get my name taken off films!" He mentioned that he got into writing for television and films "by accident" *seven* times during the interview; it was only a favor for a friend from Cambridge or the Navy. He went on to relate an anecdote about his three years as story editor for Hammer Film Studios in London. Hammer Studios produced some of the most famous and fun *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and other gothic-horror B-movies ever created (**Bold** indicates White's emphasis.):

JMW: Christopher Lee was irrepressible. He had the biggest ego. **He was so common.** He fancied himself as an opera singer. He was always wandering around the set singing. He had a deep voice. But it wasn't just self-confidence. I mean he had such an enormous ego, he really thought he was the greatest actor in the world and everybody laughed at him. (We both laugh.) But because of that he was—he, he certainly was the best Dracula. You know, for those kinds of things.

R: Were you involved. . .

JMW: But he took it all so seriously. Whereas, um, Cushing, was a **very sophisticated man, an aristocratic man, very intelligent.** But he could see the, you know, how ridiculous the whole thing was.

In this short excerpt, he clearly relates class to intelligence. He obviously shared a fellow feeling with Peter Cushing. He goes on to say:

JMW: I was always interested in military history. And **of course**, he [Cushing] was as well and he had an enormous collection of toy soldiers. And his wife died of cancer. Um. And they were very devoted to each other and she died in her 30s. He was quite bereft. You know, you never really get over something like that. He was very sensitive, you know. And the shock from that---pause--he never did quite get over it, I don't think. He had some great talent, you know; he'd been a Shakespearean actor.

The contrast between the two actors is clearly class related. Cushing's collection of toy soldiers is seen as related to his *interest in military history* which he had *of course* as an

English gentleman. His grief for his wife was because he was *sensitive*. Cushing was the *intelligent, Shakespearean actor*, versus the *common* overblown oaf who *fancied himself an opera singer*. Lee, according to White, was the better Dracula—an exaggerated grotesque character—*because* he was *common*.

The idea that a Shakespearean actor is superior to one who is not Shakespeare-trained recurred when he talked about Honor Blackman, who grew up working-class, and her successor, Diana Rigg, who was born, according to White, upper-middle-class:

JMW: That, um, Honor Blackman was a formidable female. She didn't have any charm. Diana Rigg, *of course*, was loaded with charm.

(As Cushing was, *of course*, interested in military history.)

R: *uh-huh*

J: And, *of course*, in some ways was a superior actress because she'd been **properly** trained at the Royal academy; **she was a Shakespearean actress**.

R: *uh-huh*

JMW: **Had been trained** and had a beautiful voice. . .

JMW: You know. Diana Rigg plays only one type of woman, the upper-class woman. Honor Blackman wants to play the working-class woman. So in a sense, there's a hostility there, there's a tug there, you see. They're different types.

Throughout our conversation, it was evident that he preferred Diana Rigg to Honor Blackman, yet he remembered little about Honor Blackman. It was his impression of her as working-class that he remembered. He seemed to feel that, like Christopher Lee, Blackman was *common*.

Yet he openly addressed his frustration with the class system in England. After I thanked him for talking to me about *The Avengers* and British culture in the 1960s, and I reached to turn off the tape recorder, my hand was stopped in mid-reach when he interjected:

JMW: You know I'm not sure I didn't get out of England in a sense because of the class system. It's very tiresome. **So much depends on it**, you know—little circles—the public school circle—university circle, you know, this—that. It was when I got into the movies and working for an American company that I felt a tremendous feeling of liberation. And I got up and got out of this terribly small, rather resentful, sour country, you know, to come somewhere where it was much more tolerant and freer of restrictions than you find in England. *The Avengers* is very much class, you know, Steed [the male lead character in the series] was an upper-class character, and I'd bet you most of the villains are lower-class. Either that or they're upper-class who're traitors to their class.

White sees himself an upper-class person who got into a lower-class profession early in his life, because his expected place in the empire no longer existed. The tension that caused was tiresome. He clearly resents the restrictions his birth-class placed on him, yet he also “spent his life trying to get his name off films” after becoming a respectable novelist and university professor. He is terribly attached to the “terribly small, rather resentful sour country” of his birth. The attachment was expressed often during the two hour interview. Consider his lament about his perception that England is currently losing its class system:

JMW: You know they've just abolished hunting, too.

R: Oh, really?

JMW: An upper-class activity, you see. Fox hunting. They had to get rid of it.

R: I didn't know that.

JMW: no. . (shaking his head sadly)

R: Honor Blackman would be in line with current thinking since she turned down the CBE last year.

JMW: Very much so!

R: I don't know if a lot of people turn it down, but---

JMW: NO! Not many people would! They offered her a CBE; they didn't want to make her a dame; they offered her a CBE? Which is one down from that?

R: yeah.

JMW: In fact they're thinking of abolishing the whole Order of the British Empire and renaming it. Something or other. It's terribly sad.

R: CBE is, what, Commander of the British Empire?

JMW: Yeah. To simply become a member of the British Order, which is quite an honor, you can either become an MB or an OB. MB is a Member of the British Empire and I think you probably get that if you **DO** something because they say it stems from My OWN Bloody Efforts and the OB comes from Other Buggers Efforts.

(both laughing)

JMW: And they're kind of on the bottom of the pile, you see, because above that, as you say, is the CBE, the Commander of the British Empire. And then the women become Dames.

He was delighted when I told him that the upper-class Diana Rigg, Blackman's successor in the *Avengers* series, had been made a Dame. He went on to say, in a very disapproving tone, that Honor Blackman must be in the extreme left wing of the Labour Party. That is the only scenario in which he could imagine her turning down the CBE, and act which he clearly feels is an affront to his beloved empire.

During the interview, White pointed out the embedded class consciousness in English literature:

JMW: I mean, the whole of English literature depends on class, you know? I mean, you can't imagine Henry James without class, you know?

R: *NO!* (Both laugh.)

JMW: Or even popular literature is about class. Thackery is about class. Dickens is about class.

He added that Agatha Christie, whom he knew slightly, was "mean" and "rather common," but her husband was a "gentleman." Television and movies are also about class. He told me to watch a film about a "cockney" woman called *Vera Drake*. Vera Drake is a poor woman who performs abortions for other poor women in the 1950s. He said it would help me understand cockney life and so better understand the women I might interview. He, also, referred to the Hammer films as "common" and the

Shakespeare adaptations of *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* as “public school” or “upper-class” productions. He placed a class label on every topic that arose.

The University Accent

Another fantasy theme that recurred frequently in his responses to my questions is closely related to class-by-birth. It is class-by-language. According to White, one “**must** speak properly.” He is appalled by the recent decline in the primacy of “*educated speech*” in England:

JMW: And the accents, you see, Steed’s [the upper-class male *Avengers* lead] accent would be, the kind of accent I’ve got which is the so-called “Oxford University Accent,” which has gradually been going out. Most English actors now don’t speak in the old, um, **proper** public school English.

R: *mmmhmm*

JMW: I mean, most people in England don’t speak like that, they don’t have an **original** accent, there’s something called “Estuary English,” that’s from the Thames estuary. That’s why you get Tony Blair talking, not in the public school accent, not in the sort-of upper class accent, you know. [shaking his head sadly]

R: *hmm*

JMW: Which is very interesting that so many actors came out of Wales, you see. I was born in South Wales, and Anthony Hopkins did and—who was that fellow who was married to Elizabeth Taylor?

R: *Richard Burton.*

JMW: Yes, Richard Burton, um, they all pretty well came out of the same valley, but they all went to London and learned to talk properly.

R: hmm

JMW: I mean, stage actors in England still talk with the old upper-class accent.

R: hmm.

JMW: But an awful lot of them, by any means now, have been exchanged for estuary English. Filthy, isn't it? In fact, they just sacked a presenter on the BBC because his accent was *too upper-class*.

R: really?

JMW: They thought it would offend the rest of the country, because they thought this fellow was patronizing by—by—you know, talking with his university accent. So they're trying to talk with a more *dumbed-down* accent. It's interesting. It's a class thing.

R: It is.

JMW: Of course they try to get rid of class so they want to get rid of impertinences like—(pause)—the university accent. [*his accent*]

His voice trails off sadly. He really seems to be a man who is losing his sense of identity. His country, his origin, is trying to “get rid” of his identity.

Kristeva (1980; 1984) believes that language is the post-oedipal symbolic system created from pre-oedipal desires. As Grosz (1993) points out, Kristeva identifies the semiotic with pre-oedipal sexuality and the symbolic with its oedipal reorganization. It is, then, a way to assert those basic “semiotic” desires upon the world, to express them to

the other. Because language is based in pre-oedipal existence, its embodiment begins at a time when human beings are only able to focus on themselves and their place in the new world in which they find themselves after birth. Language, then, *becomes* inextricable from origins, develops into nationalism and, consequently, embodies our sense of who we are, where we belong as connected to the nation (and class) into which we are born. White's sorrow and expressions of loss at the "dumbing-down" of the university accent to appeal to "common" people represent a loss of place in his hierarchical culture and are, therefore, intricately intertwined with his sense of place in the world—his embodied expectations of imperial privilege.

The Empire

Perhaps the third fantasy theme evidenced in the data explains White's reluctance to lose his position in the class structures and language categorizations with which he has connected himself to the world. Having only looked at colonization from a democratic, liberal-humanist point of view, I had not considered the point-of-view of the colonizer. White left England to live in the US in 1967. Yet almost four decades later, his ties to his origins are still quite visceral—the umbilical cord holds. Kristeva (1984) would argue that those pre-oedipal ties to his country and his hierarchical linguistic system are so strong because they are pre-oedipal and semiotic. The semiotic is what gives us life force, structure, coherence and cohesion as well as delineating boundaries for human behavior. What she calls for in *Desire in Language* (1980) is a focus on the *living* aspects of language. For Kristeva, (2000) the semiotic is maternal, generative,

life-giving, prenatal, pre-symbolic, and feminine. Furthermore, the structure, cohesion, and boundaries acquired during the symbolic stage are directly tied to the ideas of origins and nationalism. Thus, at the heart of sovereignty is a maternal femininity. This seems evident in the third fantasy theme found in White's narrative—England's imperial decline. Listening to his grief over England's loss of status, I was haunted by an image of him losing his *mother-England*.

He speaks of his military service in the Navy and his five years with the Foreign Service as something that was expected of his class after his completion of an M.A in Egyptology at Cambridge around 1950. It was also his unquestioned duty and fervent desire. He was, after all, expected to serve The Empire, and he expected that the Empire, would, in return, cradle him to her bosom:

JMW: England's been in a terrible tailspin of descension.¹⁶ When I went to school you were expected to go out and govern the empire, you know? I saw myself as going out and becoming the governor of Bengal or the Punjab or something. And then, first of all India went in 1936, and the African colonies went, you know, then the Caribbean went, and, uh, (pause) this has been a sort of decline for England. It's very hard to lose your imperial swagger, you know.

R: *mmmhmm*.

JMW: And accustom yourself to becoming a not very important little off-shore island again. It's tough for England that it's not a tremendously important country anymore. It's very hard for—for—for them to shed that importance they

¹⁶ That is a word meaning in a descending state. I had to look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is not in American dictionaries.

had and try and find a new role, you know. It's—it's been difficult—it's been difficult for me to live through. And difficult for the country to live through it. You know, to give up an empire. And then, most imperial powers have gone through that. Because the English, after all, have demonstrated—we've governed [pause] **we've governed a quarter or a fifth of the world.** [He said that with great pride and emphasis.]

For him, that loss of empire and the accompanying swagger is visceral and it hurts—he finds it hard to *live* with the loss. He feels eviscerated. As Kristeva (1980) would put it, his language, his pre-oedipal life-force, which he has paternally symbolized into upper-class, public-school English, has been taken away. It has left him an orphan in a foreign country—referring to citizens (children) of the UK as *they* while clearly identifying *himself* as a citizen (child) of the empire. He formed his identity while envisioning a different world than the one in which he found himself after university and compulsory service as a naval officer (just as the upper-class Steed was a former naval officer with a “public-school accent”). Perhaps that explains why White joined the Foreign Service after his service in the Royal Navy, an act he dismisses as illogical:

JMW: [After release from service in the Navy] I went back to writing for television—and then I went into the Foreign Service for 5 years oddly enough. I don't know why I did that. They sent me a letter and said they wanted me.

He was looking for a way to retrieve his fantasy-vision of the colonizer, paternally caring for the darker races—the white-man's burden—benevolent and distinctly upper-

class. His fantasy theme depended on his serving England as a colonizer in any way he could.

The fantasy theme of colonizer and empire-builder shows up even while discussing the hats and suits that men wore who were “dandified,” like the Steed character in *The Avengers*. While discussing the “proper city attire” of a “gentleman,” he begins a discussion of England’s recent down-sizing of its military. It is a theme that he comes back to time and again. He points out that Steed, being upper-class, would have served in the military and “would have come out a major, as I did”:

JMW: And possibly got a decoration out of a particular service area So very much like—Geoffrey Palmer¹⁷ was like that, Geoffrey Palmer used to wear hats. So ex-service probably influenced. This had always been very strong in England until the present time when the English army now is smaller than the single division of the army with which Wellington took Waterloo. And the British Navy consists of about 3 row boats and a pump, now. And the British air force is just lingering—[pause]—with a few old bombers that have been around for decades. It’s deplorable. Now that we have the EU, the idea is that everybody will contribute a little show and we can make up a fairly sizable force. [pause] And so I think that military tradition was a big influence [on upper-class dress]. It’s very strong in the culture.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Palmer was one of the actors in “Propellant 23,” who now stars in a weekly comedy with Judy Dench on PBS. According to White, he was born an aristocrat, studied Shakespeare, and “wound up” on television.

It is indeed. He self-identified himself with a laugh as a “neat-freak” and attributed his fastidiousness to serving in “The Guards.” Eighty-one-years-of-age at the time of the interview, he still exudes a military, upper-class bearing that is difficult to describe. As a confessed anglophile and student in his creative writing courses many years ago, I always adored him, and I was not alone. He is an incredibly charming, aristocratic, and benevolent man. Yet he keenly feels discomfiture with his status. Throughout the interview he sometimes speaks of the British people as “they” and the British ruling class as “we.” He clearly feels a deep sense of *personal* loss when he discusses the UK’s current situation:

JMW: And then *we* tell them [the citizens of the United Kingdom] it’s all going to magically turn into the Commonwealth, but would still *be* the empire, but with only the *label* Commonwealth, but that did not quite happen. However, [he says with a proud tone while raising his chin high] there is still something extraordinary—about **60 countries** in the Commonwealth. I mean even South Africa applied to rejoin the Commonwealth, you know. I mean, I mean, the Queen every year has a Commonwealth meeting in London. And all the lots of Commonwealth countries come.

R: hmm

JMW: And they’ve still got the Royal Archbishop of Canterbury and a few people like that—[pause]—I don’t know. [pause] It’s hard to know. Europe is— is going through, not so much a decline as it’s going, you know, things are leveling out; [the implication is that other countries are rising to the level of

English sophistication and advanced knowledge] India is coming up; Canada is coming up; America is quite strong. That's why they have this tremendous resentment over the, the Gulf War presence so much. The Iraq War was a power struggle and the people of Europe lost to the US.

R: Right

JMW: (laughing) The French are still trying to get French established as the leading language of the European Union. [Trying to equal English accomplishments.] You know—and possibly throughout the world and the United Nations.

R: umhmm

JMW: But England doesn't quite know where it's going or what final pattern is going to emerge. They're still quite raw—they're still resentful that it's had to come to this---

R: hmmhmm

JMW: The rich and the poor, the people who speak the educated language, the people who don't. They're very touchy about all that.

As is White. His “*they*” does not separate him from being English. It separates him from the “common” classes. He distinguished his culture from that of the US:

JMW: Yeah, yeah. You don't have class in America, you have rich people and poor people, but you don't have—you don't have that class consciousness you're born with.

I could have argued that point, but the US fantasy themes *are* different ones.

Discussion and Conclusion

The convergence of these three themes—class, language, and imperialism—converge to become a life-style rhetorical vision that is deeply ingrained—an **Ingrained Imperialist** life-style rhetorical vision. White sees the world through the gaze of a white, male, aristocratic colonizer whose ties to his origins, his nationality, are intricately intertwined with his Ingrained Imperialistic world-view. Such life-style rhetorical visions are encoded into the body (V. L. Chapman, 2005a) and, as Kristeva (1980; 1984) has observed, extend much deeper than learned habits of behavior that can be unlearned. They are semiotic, symbolic, linguistic, and embodied, and they are also culturally constructed through language and story. Sarbin (2004) explains how this embodiment happens through these shared cultural rhetorical visions or stories. He argues

that imaginings are induced by stories read or stories told, that imaginings are instances of attenuated role-taking, that attenuated role-taking requires motoric actions that produce kinesthetic cues and other embodiments, and that embodiments become a part of the total context from which persons decide how to live their lives. (p. 17)

Even after almost four decades as an expatriate, White's understanding of British culture is filtered through this Ingrained Imperialist world-view. He grew up imagining he would govern some part of the empire. He was told stories of his place in that empire and the class structure it relied upon. It was embodied. And that worldview, I found, affected his recollections of Honor Blackman who he remembered as, "a big woman and

rather awkward, common and not a very good actress.” Since the memories of her related to me by the other participants in this study could not be more contradictory, I had to consider his vastly different gaze in my analysis of the stories of learning I uncovered. Most of the women were working-class. The cultural changes that were spurred by Blackman’s portrayal of a working-class feminist, who actually mimics and ridicules the upper-class in the episode, “Death of a Batman,” were not simply powerful because of her gender deconstruction—Cathy Gale raised issues of class and empire, as well. When she directly challenged Steed on government actions, she overstepped her bounds by directly questioning the decisions of the ruling class. As Bormann points out:

Some communities may share dramas in which cardboard characters enact stereotyped melodramas. Others may live in a social reality of complexity peopled with characters of stature enacting high tragedies. The dramas themselves, however, always interpret, slant, suggest, and persuade. Two rhetorical communities living side by side in the same culture may have mirror-image rhetorical visions. That is, the same historic personages may be heroes in one community and villains in another; or one group may celebrate certain courses of action as laudable while the other denigrates the same scenarios. (p. 135)

Some journalists’ responses to Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale, which surfaced in the contemporaneous texts and documents I analyzed for this study, matched White’s recollections. It is obvious from those contemporary documents that some viewers were intimidated or disturbed by a television character that challenged, even deconstructed,

their shared rhetorical vision. Fortunately, however, there are rebels within every *homo narrans*, and Cathy Gale represented those rebels. She questioned British certitude, tradition, and self-positioned superiority. It only takes *imagination*, and *dissatisfaction* with ones' inherited, embodied position in the shared fantasy themes, to challenge a rhetorical vision and, like the child's game of "gossip," the stories begin to mutate and change in the retelling. Those reconstructed stories are the fascinating fodder that fed this investigation into women's learning lives. In this way, symbolic convergence theory, as well as other methods of narrative analysis I used as indicated by the data, greatly informed my interpretations of the British women's stories of learning.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

THE AVENGERS, WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS, AND PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

A friend of mine, who once worked as a marketing research analyst for MTV, often quips that she was forced into retirement quite early—at age 29—because, she asserts, “no one could work there who was thirty.” According to her, the general feeling at MTV, when she worked there in the 80s and 90s, was that no one who reached the age of 30 could possibly understand marketing to MTV’s young viewers. Now an associate professor of advertising and public relations at a major research university, my friend has no regrets about her career moves. But her story is indicative of one of the reasons many adult educators dismiss popular culture, especially popular television, as a teaching tool. How can teachers use what they do not understand or appreciate or that which, like MTV, does not seem to value or appreciate them? Besides, how can educators determine which television programs, music, and trends are having an impact on their students? When students range in age from 18 to 80, how can educators facilitate meaningful discussions of popular culture in the classroom? How can critical educators achieve emancipatory goals using popular media in a welfare-to-work program, an ESL class for new immigrants, a GED class, or a university classroom?

Difficulties abound. Educators have to ask themselves if the resultant learning is worth the effort. Since popular culture by nature is often fleeting and transitory, can it have a lasting impact on students? Does it produce meaning-making or temporary

imitation? And even if informal learning is taking place in front of the television at home, is it possible—or even desirable—to attempt to connect to and build on that learning in the classroom?

My research indicates that such learning is lasting and that it may, indeed, be worth the effort. As Giroux and Simon (1989a) assert, “critical educators need to retheorize the importance of popular culture as a central category for both understanding and developing a theory and practice of critical pedagogy” (p. 4). Sometimes learning from popular television can be powerful, especially when a culture or an individual is desirous of change.

This conclusion is divided into four sections. The first section is a summary of the unusual British television program, with an unusual female lead role, that captured the imagination of women viewers in England from 1962-1964 and inspired this dissertation. The second is a brief summary of the findings I uncovered when investigating viewers’ responses to that early British television program. The third section explores the experience of watching television as a space of public/popular pedagogy and examines possible implications for adult educators. The last section offers suggestions for classroom practice.

More than a Cult TV Classic

In 1931, during feminism’s first wave, Virginia Woolf (1980) spoke about traditional British gender roles explaining that there was an angel in every house who

was intensely sympathetic. She was intensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it—in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the mind and wishes of others. (p. 17)

That angel made women doubt their abilities, made them weak, made them submissive, and made them succumb to drudgery and servitude instead of realizing their talents and abilities. She says of her struggle for a career as a writer, “I did my best to kill her. . . . I acted in self defense” (p. 17). That “phantom” angel was created by, among other things, popular culture.

It would take a shift in popular culture to help bar that phantom from at least a few dwellings. Three decades after Virginia Woolf battled the angel in her house to realize her ambition as a writer, Honor Blackman, in the role of Dr. Catherine Gale, left a trail of bruised, battered, banned and broken angels in her wake as the female half of the crime-fighting duo *The Avengers*. In 1962, before the advent of second wave feminism in Britain, Cathy Gale regularly challenged the thinking of the status quo—which bowler-hatted John Steed, played by actor Patrick Macnee, personified.

In the series, he is government; she is not, as she often reminds him. He is old school tie and vintage Bentley; she is black leather pants and fast convertible. She only helps Steed when he appeals to her sense of justice and humanitarianism. And she constantly challenges his cavalier attitude towards human rights, biological warfare, nuclear arms, and individual liberty amidst their ongoing debate on other social and

political issues. Before Cathy Gale, female characters on television were objects of ridicule, victims of crime, or the angels in the house. But as one of the contemporaneous viewers told me, “After Cathy Gale, nothing was the same.” Blackman “transgressed gender definitions by displaying behavior normally reserved for males” (Andrae, 1996, p. 117)—shooting guns, wearing leather pants, riding motorcycles, throwing men across the room, and succeeding professionally.

Cathy Gale cared about all people, even the criminals she helped to catch. While she worked to help people and might be seen as sympathetic, and she was certainly charming, that’s where any resemblance to Woolf’s “angel in the house” stopped. In a typical exchange between the two leads, in “The Man with Two Shadows,” Steed drops by her apartment and asks, “What’s for breakfast?” rather than demurely responding as women usually did in 1960s prime-time, Cathy counters with a sharp, “Cook it and see.” She is no domestic angel. Brian Clemens, writer of 45 episodes including five written for the Cathy Gale character, confided to me when I interviewed him in 2006, “It was liberating for me, really, writing for Cathy Gale. I had to think about women in a new way.” Her female audience was compelled to do the same.

Stories of Identity Development and Learning

Over the course of more than 18 months, I listened to the life stories of 17 contemporaneous women viewers of the Cathy Gale *Avengers* episodes and I spent uncountable hours watching 1960s British “spy” television. I immersed myself in the popular culture, events, politics, historical context, fashion and TV of the time. The

results of this research offer some interesting implications for adult educators. The avant-garde model of a strong, independent feminist character at that time in British cultural history produced long-term effects on female viewers' lives.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir (1973), like Woolf, expresses frustration with European women's limitations:

Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly. Let but the future be opened to her, and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the present. (p. 605)

For some of her women viewers, watching Cathy Gale *opened the future by showing the future*. According to Deming (1990), "'breaking the sequence', Woolf's term for rupturing the expected order of events in a narrative to break their hegemonic inevitability, is also possible in television" (p. 58). Cathy Gale, playing a role made androgynous to a certain extent by her reading lines and performing actions intended for a male character, ruptured the expected order of female characters on television and in British culture as a whole. This break in the sequence of cultural representations of women allowed viewers to not only see possibilities but also, in following Cathy's example, to fight for those possibilities.

There were several common threads in the stories the women recounted, but the most popular thread was the overarching theme of defiance. The women who participated in this study had grown up in post-war Britain when women were encouraged to marry, stay home, and replenish the decimated population. While

women's work outside the home was valued—even demanded during the war, Britain's government sought ways to send women home to have children in the late forties and early fifties. England lost a significant portion of its population during the war and a move to “rebuild the family” was stressed by “professionals and politicians” who focused their attention “squarely on the issue of ‘adequate mothering’ as the surest means to securing future social stability” (Jane Lewis, 1992, p. 11). These concerns were prompted by the “pragmatic problems of the social and geographical dislocation of families as a result of the war” (p. 12). Rejecting the role of housewife was equated to rejecting queen and country. As one woman told me, “It wasn't just heresy to not want to marry and have babies, it was unpatriotic—almost criminal.” Another woman agreed: “I grew up during the war, but I remember my parents talking about the days when England was a formidable power. My parents were in India for a while. It was all the same; one was expected to marry a soldier and have children.” In a country/culture that once headed an empire that included almost a quarter of the known world, the pressure to conform was intense. Producing a family was a patriotic act and a family obligation. Both sexes were encouraged to consider their duty to replenish the depleted empire. The experience of losing that empire for Britons was both painful and personal. As Jon Manchip White, one of *The Avengers* writers told me sadly:

England's been in a terrible tailspin of descension¹⁸. When I went to school you were expected to go out and govern the empire, you know? I saw myself as going out and becoming the governor of Bengal or the Punjab or something. . . . And

¹⁸ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this word is now rarely used, but means the action of descending or a fall in dignity or status.

then, first of all India went in 1936, then the African colonies went, you know, then the Caribbean went and, uh, (pause). This has been a sort of decline for England. It's very hard to lose your imperial swagger, you know.

That loss of imperial swagger, England's descent to a world-role with lesser status, seems to have caused the culture to become more entrenched in traditional gender roles and to place an even greater emphasis on women's domesticity.

White wrote for the character played by Ian Hendry, the actor Honor Blackman replaced when she joined the cast. White confided that he never really wrote good parts for women; they were always peripheral. He said he would not have written a part that included a woman fighting a man. He told me he "wouldn't have expected a woman, you know, to lash out and kick men in the whatsits." For him, like most Britons of the time, women remained in supporting roles both on screen and off. But his script was not acted by Ian Hendry, but by Honor Blackman as Cathy Gale—so, despite his intent when he penned the scenes—Blackman kicked, pounded, tossed, and defeated the idea that women should remain in demure supporting roles.

In that environment, Cathy Gale's female audience recognized that Cathy had no problem kicking both men, and traditional gender roles, in the "whatsits." They metaphorically followed suit. As one contemporaneous viewer, now in her mid-sixties, expressed it, "I have always known that there is a genuine Cathy Gale element within my persona that is available to call forth to help me to deal with difficult confrontational situations." Two women actually took judo in the 1970s and learned hand-to-hand combat. Smiling mischievously, one explained, "I never forgot Cathy's ability to fight

men who were much bigger and stronger than she. It seemed so powerful, you know? I wanted to feel powerful, (pause) and I did.” Watching the independent, intelligent, well-educated and athletic Cathy Gale empowered her viewers by offering them an alternative to the women their culture told them they were supposed to be. And they admired Cathy for being forceful only when she needed to be. As one woman put it, “She can be commanding when she wishes to be commanding but when she doesn’t wish to be commanding, she can dispose of it.”

One interviewee, now a scientist at a major research university, made the distinction between Cathy Gale and other popular female TV characters who “were pathetic women that fell over when the wind changed . . . That was the other role model, pathetic creatures that needed help. . . Women were not doing things. She (Gale) was the only one.” Another woman described several contemporaneous prime-time programs and the female roles in them saying,

They were meek, obedient wives and mothers who were sometimes brutalized by their husbands [as in *Z-Cars*] and sometimes just used by the men in the series, but none of them protested. It was accepted as inevitable. Their place. None stood up for herself. There was no one else like Cathy. They were all victims.

The women spoke of Cathy Gale with an intimacy that resembled that of a long close friendship: “She helps me, Cathy does. When I feel nervous or apprehensive, I think to myself, ‘What would Cathy do?’” Chuckling, one woman told me, “I *am* her—Cathy Gale. I identify with her so strongly that I think I’ve become her. I walk like she walks and talk, I hope, as she talks.”

Cathy Gale's contemporaneous women learner-viewers have quietly followed Honor Blackman's career as well, going to plays in which she has performed and watching her on film and television. They speak of her with a deep respect and with an appreciation for both the woman and her art. They credit her with changing the direction of their lives when she publicly shattered the traditional mold created by British culture.

Most of the women, also, credit her and her role as Cathy Gale for creating the London fashion scene of the later 1960s that changed women's fashion forever. Cathy's head-to-toe leather outfits worn for fight scenes and her chic suits and hats worn in her professional life, even the bikini she dawned in one episode, "The Man with Two Shadows," were a great influence on the fashion industry—but none of these compared to the impact of her leather boots. According to most of the study participants, London women still love boots and wear them year-round. Cathy Gale started a trend that has persists as part of the fabric of London life. Not only did Blackman wear boots on every program, but she and co-star Macnee released a recording of a song called "Kinky Boots" as a promotion for the show. The song was based on the overwhelming commercial success of *The Avengers* and the popularity of Cathy's boots. As one viewer emphatically stated, "To this day, when I have to deal with a difficult situation, I put on my boots thinking, 'What would Cathy do?'"

All the women who contacted me for interviews are successful women. They credit the example set by Cathy Gale for their professional success. Some of the women told me they would not have gone to university if it had not been for Cathy Gale's example. One woman explained: "You'd do quite well if you learned to type and do

shorthand and get an office job. But you were never expected to then be (pause), one day—the boss. I mean, if you were really, really good, and clever and you wanted a career, you’d be somebody’s secretary.” But watching Cathy Gale in her late teens made her dream of other possibilities. She “got more tenacious” because of her “admiration for the character” and began resisting the demands of her parents that she marry and start a family. One participant wanted to go into theatre, but her parents considered it “next to [being] a prostitute if you wanted to go on stage.” Nevertheless, she and her husband currently produce and act in amateur theatre, and she operates an Internet business that sells theatre memorabilia.

One woman cites Cathy’s influence on her choice for a career in science. After all, Cathy had a Ph.D. and did research; why shouldn’t she? This, the youngest participant in the study, watched the series in her teens rather than early adulthood, and confides that her teachers told her, “Girls don’t do science.” But she always knew she could be a scientist, and today, she is a scientist.

Another woman in the study is a professional consultant who, with her partner, conducts workshops for women on female *empowerment*. She laughed as she told me, “I give seminars all over the world on how to act like Cathy Gale. I just call it something else.” All of them still look to Cathy Gale as an example, a role model, and mentor. “Women today don’t have Cathy Gale as a role model. They have silly little half-dressed twits who glorify in ignorance, swoon over men, and make an art out of helplessness,” one participant explained, getting angrier as we talked. I was fascinated as they revealed the depths of the impact that a fictional television character, remembered for over 40

years, has had on the formation of their identities as professional, competent, and empowered women. A role model they cling to still—with a vengeance.

Cathy Gale's viewers have learned to *kill the angel in the house* and they have refused to allow their wings to be clipped, all because they had watched a woman on a prime-time crime drama defy traditional concepts of a woman's place. Because of her example, they could imagine themselves doing the same. And they have continued to follow her example for over forty years.

Television and Pedagogy

Television has a significant influence on our students, no matter what age group they represent. Critical educators should recognize how significant its impact may be. Brookfield (1986) emphasizes this point:

The 'effects' of television cannot be separated from their context and treated as isolated phenomena to which we are given limited exposure. On the contrary, television's influence is all-pervasive. . . . it shapes the framework of our political discourse. (p. 152)

As this investigation of the pedagogical power of *The Avengers* has shown, television can be a powerful influence in the lives of women. Hayes (2000) notes, "Women's learning takes place in a wide variety of social contexts: in community groups, in the home, in the workplace, in religious associations, in leisure activities, and in more formal educational settings—in literally every context of life" (p. 23). One context is television viewing, which Armstrong (2000) asserts, is "far from being about passive

non-learning.” He believes “television viewing can have tremendous potential for stimulating critical commentary and raising awareness of a wide range of issues, not the least through popular cultural programs including soaps” (p. 2).

Critical adult educators should help learners make meaning of their experiences by connecting to what they are learning outside the classroom. Freire and Giroux (1989) argue this succinctly as they insist that critical pedagogy “must incorporate aspects of popular culture as a serious educational discourse” (p. ix). Giroux and Simon (1989a) state this claim more directly:

Educators who refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives. (p. 3)

Giroux (1999) later argues that ‘public pedagogy’ is performed through popular culture. He points out that media culture

has become a substantial, if not primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen. (2-3)

This may be particularly true for women in the early 1960s. Opportunities for women to find a spectrum of real-life role models were limited. At the time, most adult women did not work outside the home (Jane Lewis, 1992). This demographic reality produced entire

genres of television programs, like soap operas and quiz shows, aimed at the female audience. For many working-class women, television became their connection to the rest of the world. If they were to imagine women in roles other than that of their mothers, television would have been the most likely source.

Gauntlett (2002) claims that understanding the power of popular media is crucial for expanding gender awareness:

To destabilize the taken-for-granted-assumptions about the supposedly binary divide between female and male, masculinity and femininity, gay and straight, what could be more powerful than a two-pronged attack, on the levels of both everyday life and popular media? (p. 143)

As critical educators, if we are to help students' resist the pervasive binary thinking about gender or, in fact, most social, ethical, and political issues, popular media—something they already engage with daily—should be one of the first places we start.

The women in this study, like adult education students, formed their identities, in part, through popular culture—particularly television. According to Ellsworth (2005, p. 4),

The visual experience of watching a film . . . has a material nature that involves biological and molecular events taking place in the body of the viewer and in the physical and imagined space between the viewer and the film. Affect and sensation are *material* and part of that engagement.

Ellsworth believes that viewer responses to the experience of intensely engaging with a character or story is a “pedagogical anomaly” that is “difficult to see as *pedagogy* only

when we view it from the ‘center’ of the dominant educational discourses and practices” (p. 5). But when we reject the view that “knowledge is a thing already made and learning as an experience already known,” we can see the space between viewer and screen as “the experience of a learning self in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 5) and the term “pedagogy” can then be applied. This public pedagogy takes place in the body of the viewer and in the space between viewer and television. Educators can tap into that personal pedagogy to foster personal and professional growth.

My research suggests that adults can experience television as a portal of learning about self/subject that contributes to identity formation. Adult educators should not be asking, “What knowledge is of most worth?” or “Whose knowledge should be taught?” or “Which practices will be most efficient in teaching these knowledges?” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 165). Instead, we should view popular culture in adult lives and ask, “How do we use what has already been thought as a provocation and call to invention?” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 165). How can critical adult educators foster critical awareness, identity development, and social change using the informal, self-directed learning taking place in the spaces between our students and our media culture? This, of course, is part of the challenge before adult educators.

Suggestions for Practice

Adult educators must take seriously the learning taking place in living rooms by television viewers. Cultural studies and film scholar, Lynn Joyrich, (1995) issued this challenge to educators:

Those interested in a critical pedagogy might very well turn to the insights of cultural studies, particularly in the light of today's emphasis on both media and literacy and the politics of cultural diversity. Attuned to the ways in which students form identifications in relation to popular culture and to the ways in which these affective investments might encourage active ideological resistance, educators interested in legitimating the diversity of student experiences have taken up film and television as empowering cultural forms—that is, as texts that seem to authorize student participation and knowledge. (p. 55)

Critical adult educators must investigate these empowering spaces of learning and incorporate the results in their practices as activist-educators. In order to use popular culture products to promote maturity and identity development in the classroom, or as a vehicle for any educational objective, educators must make a concerted effort to know what their students are watching. On the first day of my composition classes, students complete a questionnaire that asks for their favorite hobbies, television shows, musical artists, movies, books, etc. as well as practical questions like how many hours per week they work and what their educational goals are. I then incorporate aspects of the most watched television shows, the most popular music and films, as well as the issues raised in “their” media into the planning and implementation of course objectives. This requires time-consuming homework on my part and a flexible syllabus but, I am convinced, it elicits more powerful and engaged prose, as well as faster development of critical thinking skills. As a composition teacher, I have been fortunate to be able to use

discussions of popular culture and prime-time television to foster critical analysis, social/political awareness, and better academic writing.

Educators in all disciplines can benefit from incorporating popular television into their teaching. Certainly, educators in ESL, GED, and community adult literacy programs can use current popular programs to teach their students. Popular television has often been used in adult literacy programs. However, in his discussion of adult learning through television, Armstrong (2000) asserts that, “Television is more than a vehicle for developing literacy. From a liberatory perspective, television has its own literacy that needs to be critically decoded and interpreted” (p.4). This potential holds promising prospects for critical educators and possibilities for a better world.

In addition, critical educators in developmental reading and writing courses within community colleges and universities can draw from student’s engagement with television programs to develop awareness and foster active engagement with new ideas. This will not only help develop skills and techniques for better reading and writing, but also prepare students for the critical thinking required for college-level work and active citizenship. Yet another context may be welfare-to-work programs which can find much fodder for teaching, as well. For example, the popular *Friends* television show presents unrealistic work-to-income-to-lifestyle models that most students would benefit from critically analyzing.

Largely untapped is the benefit to adult educators of incorporating the popular into their courses in order to facilitate critical thinking and to connect content to what students know. In a recent discussion of the 2006 movie, *Chronicles of Narnia*, that

spontaneously arose in my class, I realized that none of my students had understood the context of the children's exile to the country. I took the opportunity to offer a short history lesson, which I was later able to reinforce by using it as background for a discussion of the second-wave feminist movement taken from our textbook.

Educators in a variety of disciplines have begun to explore the value of using popular television to facilitate student learning. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics recently developed a website to help teachers in 7-12 teach math utilizing the popular television crime drama *NUMB3RS* ("*Teachers and students give NUMB3ERS a thumbs up,*" 2006). Adult developmental math teachers could certainly make use of those materials. Anijar (2000) offers a critical analysis of *Star Trek* fans who are educators and calls for a rethinking of the myths and American hegemonic forces at work in *Star Trek*. She warns educators to evaluate their own identification with the series before enthusiastically and uncritically reproducing those dominant social and political ideals. Many adult educators could make successful use of these emerging resources for both self-reflexive practice and classroom curriculum.

Future Direction

In his discussion of Foucault's "technologies of the self" and media, gender and identity, Gauntlett (2002) suggests that "an individual's ethics are manifested in their mindset and actions" (p. 125). He further argues that "'technologies of the self' refers to the ways in which people put forward, and police their 'selves' in society; and the ways in which available discourses may enable or discourage various practices of self" (p.

125). Popular television is an available discourse that educators cannot ignore. It is powerful and, as Brookfield (1986) points out, all-pervasive. It is often much more accessible to our students than academic discourse. Popular television influences the ethics, the practices of self, the identities and moral foundations of our students. Critical adult educators have an obligation to insert themselves into that matrix. As the results of *The Avengers* study indicate, entertainment television can be instrumental in forming our gender and adult identities. Adult educators working in all arenas must pay attention to the powerful influence of the popular.

My friend who left MTV at the age of 29 is still one of the hippest people I know. She keeps up with trends in popular culture as part of her academic research. Her university students benefit from her insatiable curiosity about what is currently “*in*”. Adult learners are making connections between the classroom and popular culture with or without our facilitation. Like my ex-MTV-marketer-turned-critical-educator friend, we should make an effort, even though we may be past age 29, to connect with the MTV/IPOD generation. It is imperative that we identify those things that interest and fascinate our students. In setting an example as life-long learners, engaged with the popular media that our students value, we can prove by our breadth of knowledge that adult educators do, indeed, know something about the world our students inhabit, and that we can connect to it—no matter what the age.

This investigation has been a transformational experience for me. From the disorienting dilemma that led to my decision to pursue this line of inquiry, as I outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, to the unexpected, fascinating exposure to

difference that resulted from the three trans-women's stories of learning and transformation, to the experiences and adventures of travel, to the making of new friends, to the analysis, writing, rewriting, and critical self-examination required to complete the project, I am a changed, more self-aware, more wise person. I am also enamored with research and writing. I feel as if I've had a complete blood transfusion—the dulled-by-life, weary, numbed blood coursing through my body for so many years has been replaced with oxygenated, iron-filled pulsating light—dark red, rich, fluid and beautifully invigorating.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR VIEWERS

I give my consent to participate in a doctoral dissertation project by Robin Redmon Wright, a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University. I will be one of up to 50 people interviewed for this study to be interviewed between June 1 and December 31, 2005. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of my participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the character of Catherine Gale, in *The Avengers* television show from 1962-1964 had on audiences and those participating in the making of the show.
2. I agree to be interviewed and I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and possibly videotaped.
3. I understand that there is minimal risk associated with this research. What I choose to share in the interview will be up to me.
4. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential if I request it. While some of my comments may be used in the dissertation, my name will not be used unless I give written permission. My identity may be known only by the researcher conducting this interview.
5. The tape recording and, when applicable, video recording of my interview will be kept by the researcher in a secure place and will not be made available to anyone else. The student will produce a verbatim transcript of the interview. Upon my request, I may have a copy of the transcript and also have the tape sent to me when the assignment is completed.
6. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, either now or during the course of the project. If desired I can receive a report of the findings of this study.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board-- Human Subjects in Research, Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding subjects' rights, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted

through Ms. Angelina Raines, Director of Research Compliance, Office of Vice President for Research at (979) 458-4067 (araines@vprmail.tamu.edu).

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

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APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM FOR *THE AVENGERS* PERSONNEL

I give my consent to participate in a doctoral dissertation project by Robin Redmon Wright, a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University. I will be one of several people interviewed for this study to be interviewed between June 1 and December 31, 2005. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of my participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the character of Catherine Gale, in *The Avengers* television show from 1962-1964 had on audiences and those participating in the making of the show.
2. I agree to be interviewed and I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and possibly videotaped.
3. I understand that there is minimal risk associated with this research. What I choose to share in the interview will be up to me.
4. I understand that my identity will not be kept confidential as a portion of my work will be part of the study.
5. The tape recording and, when applicable, video recording of my interview will be kept by the researcher in a secure place and will not be made available to anyone else. The student will produce a verbatim transcript of the interview. Upon my request, I may have a copy of the transcript and also have the tape sent to me when the assignment is completed.
6. The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, either now or during the course of the project. If desired I can receive a report of the findings of this study.

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I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Signature

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APPENDIX C

VIEWER INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What were the cultural norms for women in Britain in the late 1950s and early 1960s?
2. How were those norms transmitted? How were they taught?
3. How old were you when you first watched Cathy Gale in *The Avengers*?
4. What was going on in your life at the time?
5. Can you tell me any stories about how the show/character affected you?
6. Do you consider yourself a feminist?
7. What role do you think Cathy Gale played in your becoming a feminist?
8. Did watching Cathy Gale lead you to look for other strong women characters?
9. Tell me about any specific episodes you may remember?

APPENDIX D

ACTOR/WRITER INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Do you remember how women's roles were viewed in British culture in the early 1960s?
2. Can you tell me anything about women in television in the 1960s?
3. How did people react to the Catherine Gale character?
4. What else do you remember about working on *The Avengers* that might tell me about audience reception of Cathy Gale?

VITA

Robin Redmon Wright is a native of Wartburg, Tennessee, and she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Tennessee in May 1993 and her Master of Arts in English Literature from the University of Tennessee in May 1995. She entered the doctoral program at Texas A&M University in Educational Human Resource Development, with a specialization in Adult Education, in 2002. She received her Ph.D. in August 2007.

Ms. Wright was Academic Assistance and Resource Center Director at Stephen F. Austin State University from January 1999, until July 2007. She received the Adult Education Research Conference's Graduate Student Research Award in 2006. Dr. Wright is now an Assistant Professor of Adult Learning and Teaching, One UTSA Circle, Dept. of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching, University of Texas, San Antonio 78249, and may be reached at robin.wright@utsa.edu or by calling 210-458-5640.

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